

# The Changing Face of Patient Education: Taking Charge of One's Own Learning

By Barry Rosenthal, Professional Development Specialist

**P**atients of all ages can now put their everyday computer smarts to good use and educate themselves about health and self-management. They are accustomed to using the Internet and generally know how to access resources on the web that address their particular issues; they often come to appointments armed with information downloaded from websites.

## The Web

The good news is that there are many sites that supply excellent evidence-informed information as well as support sites where patients can ask questions of knowledgeable clinicians and exchange experience-based strategies with peers who share their condition. Patients should be encouraged to use the resources available to them and take an active role in managing their health and any health-related conditions. By researching and getting a broad picture of their condition and the possibilities and challenges surrounding it, patients can assist with the creation of a plan of care and effectively carry it out.

## Facebook and Twitter

Social media, too, provide patients with the opportunity to access the latest research findings,

join support groups and discuss their concerns and successes with like-minded people and health professionals. Patient interest lies not only with the physiological aspects of their condition but also with the psychological, social, financial and quality-of-life issues they may be dealing with.

Among the benefits to this approach are that patients quickly see they are not alone in their struggles and can exchange practical strategies to help them with their daily and longer-term challenges.

## The Role of the Clinician

In light of this growing trend, it is essential that patients get the *right* information from these websites and other sources. Clinicians are advised to research appropriate sites and pass the information along to patients. As well, they must critically evaluate and discuss any relevant information patients bring in in a supportive way that furthers the clinician-patient relationship and encourages patient confidence in their ability to self-manage.

There will be patients who think they can find everything they want on the web or believe that a strategy will be appropriate for them just because they've read about it. That leaves the clinician



## A Real-life Example

The Diabetic Foot Canada Twitter feed and Facebook page were launched to support clinicians, but quickly patients also became followers and contributors. Varied perspectives strengthened the level of engagement among all participants, and it seems that patients who are active on the feeds have no difficulty accessing or understanding the information presented, even when it is in the form of research articles from peer-reviewed publications.

According to Mariam Botros, CEO of Wounds Canada and moderator of both feeds, “The patients don’t see barriers, and neither should we. These patients are taking charge of their own learning, and clinicians had best keep up.”

with the additional job of managing patient expectations and clarifying the benefits and challenges of any particular strategy.

## Conclusion

Patients who conduct research on the web or through social media will undoubtedly have questions, opening the door for health professionals to explore self-management strategies and create a sustainable plan of care. When patients are involved in managing their own health—something worth encouraging them to do—the clinician should see it as an opportunity to direct patients to additional, vetted resources, discuss key issues based on those resources and support patients in helping themselves. 🩹

## Wounds Canada Online Resources

### Wounds Canada:

Web: <https://woundscanada.ca/>

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/woundscanada](http://www.facebook.com/woundscanada)

Twitter: @woundscanada



### Diabetic Foot Canada:

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/DiabeticFootCanada](http://www.facebook.com/DiabeticFootCanada)

DiabeticFootCanada

Twitter: @DiabeticFootCa



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## Four Tips for Ensuring Safe Use of Online Information

Clinicians have an important role to play in helping patients safely use the health-care information they find online. Here’s how they can help:

1. Actively encourage patients to discuss with them the information they have found
2. Verify the accuracy and credibility of the information
3. Provide context for the information, so patients have a full understanding of it
4. Provide alternative sites for them to explore

