

dr digital

He tweets, he blogs, he posts. Cardiologist James Beckerman, M.D., taps **social media** to help prevent cardiovascular disease.



BY KRIS CALDWELL
PHOTOS BY PETE STONE

The posts come daily, sometimes hourly:



"I'm having these strange sensations in my heart."



"Can it get better on its own?"




"Everything I'm reading online is freaking me out."



"Dr. Beckerman, PLEASE REPLY."

As a physician expert for WebMD, Providence Heart and Vascular Institute cardiologist **James Beckerman, M.D.**, is there to answer.

While doctors and health care organizations scramble to gain traction on the Internet and to make business sense of social tools such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs and forums, Dr. Beckerman's well-established profile is on the rise. An early adopter in the late 1990s, he now finds himself on the leading edge of one of the hottest trends in health care: using social networking to interact with people who are interested in cardiovascular disease and prevention.

"I've come to realize that social media is a way for doctors to re-engage, reconnect and re-enter the health conversation taking place everywhere," says Dr. Beckerman, 38. "Perhaps most gratifying for me is that it's breaking down traditional walls between physician and patient." 

to say that Dr. Beckerman's educational platform is huge is an understatement. WebMD.com gets 60 million visitors a month. MedHelp.org, where he occasionally blogs about heart health, has 8.5 million monthly visitors. On Twitter, the microblog service that allows users to share links and comments in 140-character bites, Dr. Beckerman has nearly 1,000 followers. His online exposure doesn't even count his frequent appearances on local television and radio or at public forums as a physician spokesperson for Providence Heart and Vascular Institute.

Yet, the Internet is now at the center of Dr. Beckerman's outreach platform. In just six years, from 2001 to 2007, the number of people conducting online health searches doubled to 70 million.

Consumers now rely on the Internet to answer their health questions as much as they do traditional sources, such as books, broadcast media, newspapers and magazines, according to the Center for Studying Health System Change, a nonpartisan policy research organization in Washington, D.C.

"I think that patients are looking at sites with physician bloggers as sources of credible information with no financial incentive and no waiting room," says Dr. Beckerman. "Social media furthers my goal to share ideas that I think are important about health and wellness with a larger community of people than the ones I can meet in person in my clinic."

Early dabblings establish early identity

Dr. Beckerman's foray into digital media began modestly and not by design during the late-1990s dot-com boom. Blogs and online social networks were yet to arrive, and health-centered Web sites were just beginning to take off.

"People like me realized, wow, there are all of these new Web sites that need good health content," Dr. Beckerman says. "But what emeritus professor at a big university is going to want to pen an article about chest pain or something for some Web site that few people have heard of? So the Web sites began turning to medical interns like me to do that."

In 1999, Dr. Beckerman was an internal medicine resident at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston when a former classmate from Harvard Medical School passed along an offer he couldn't resist. USA Today.com wanted a weekly Web column chronicling the life of a young doctor. Enthusiastic about his experiences in medical school and eager to share the knowledge he had gained, Dr. Beckerman agreed to write it.

In the months that followed, Dr. Beckerman decided to

leverage his experience as a Web columnist. He approached dozens of health sites, and on occasion was paid a modest fee for his writing.

It was after posting one of these articles that Dr. Beckerman saw the enormous potential of this new frontier. The topic was infective endocarditis, or heart valve infection. PersonalMD.com, one of the early successful health content providers, picked up Dr. Beckerman's story, and suddenly it was everywhere.

"I would go to some other random Web site about health stuff, and there would be my article, as if I had written it for them!" Dr. Beckerman says. It was then that the Internet's insatiable appetite for health information truly hit home.

Seizing opportunity in the new interactive era

Dr. Beckerman was a highly sought cardiologist after he completed his residency at Massachusetts General Hospital and a cardiology fellowship at Stanford University. Born and raised on the East Coast, he'd never even visited Portland, but he admired the Northwest's natural beauty and the worldwide reputation of Providence Heart and Vascular Institute. After arriving in 2006, he put his Internet work on the back burner for a time to establish his busy practice with Columbia Cardiology Associates (soon to be part of Providence St. Vincent Heart Clinic) and to spend time with his wife and two young sons.

But in 2008, social media beckoned. Networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook were drawing millions of users, and health content sites had thriving message boards where people could post questions and get answers. Activity on these boards had grown so much, in fact, that it gave rise to a new kind of Google searcher: the cyberchondriac. Cyberchondriacs fuel their fears and anxieties about mundane health conditions based on self-conducted Internet research; for example, jumping to the conclusion of cancer based on a search for "freckle."

For Dr. Beckerman, who focuses on lifestyle and prevention as much as on treatment, social media offered a chance to enrich online discussions about health and wellness with reliable information.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm giving advice to my patients every day that so many others could use; why not tap in again to what's happening online?'" Dr. Beckerman says. "I was excited about the opportunity to take it to the next level."

So one winter day in 2008, between heart procedures he was performing in the catheter lab, Dr. Beckerman dialed the phone number he'd found on WebMD's "Contact Us" link.

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"I said, 'I'm looking at your site and I don't see a heart expert on your message board. I could do that for you,'" he recalls. After being told that times are tough and the budget is tight, Dr. Beckerman replied, "I'm not going to charge you. Let's just do it."

The questions have come ever since. One member worries about strange symptoms. Another wants to know about medication options for atrial fibrillation. Over the course of three days in January 2010, Dr. Beckerman answered more than 15 questions on WebMD and posted 13 tweets from his Twitter account.

Healthy give and take

In fitting with social media's intimate culture, Dr. Beckerman's style is informal. In one tweet he may pass on an article about the connection between fish oil and longevity; in another, a viral joke.

"I worry that patients feel as if their doctors are detached from the everyday world," he says. "Social media allows people to see us more clearly – that we're silly sometimes, have kids, like music or saw 'Avatar.' I think that's important."

For doctors, an intriguing feature of social media's two-way communication is that they can learn from patient populations.

"I'm surprised how many 23-year-old men are feeling chest discomfort and palpitations," Dr. Beckerman says. "They're not going to their doctor, because they feel confident, athletic and invincible. But they will reach out for information on WebMD prior to taking other measures."

Dr. Beckerman isn't the only one from Providence exploring social media. Providence Health & Services – Oregon has its own Facebook page and Twitter account. Employees from Providence St. Vincent Medical Center also starred in the breast-cancer-related Pink Glove Dance video, a viral sensation with more than 10 million hits on YouTube.

Still, even some of that video's traffic carries Dr. Beckerman's fingerprints. He shared the Pink Glove Dance video with Facebook friend Peter Facinelli, the actor who plays a vampire doctor in the hit movie series "Twilight." Facinelli tweeted about the video – "Check out this FUN video 4 breast cancer awareness" – to his 1.5 million followers. By the next day, views of the Pink Glove Dance had jumped from 400,000 to 1.1 million.

"If you provide things that people find helpful or beneficial – they learn something, or they laugh, or they pause during the day to reflect – I feel you get rewarded later in unforeseen ways," Dr. Beckerman says. "That's not my strategy; it's just the way that relationships work."

Shining without being a star

For Dr. Beckerman, gratification from social media comes from the quality of its free-flowing interactions rather than the quantity of his following. He's the first to acknowledge that his online stature is still budding in comparison to nationally recognized physicians such as Mehmet Oz, M.D., and Sanjay Gupta, M.D., or even other early adopters of the technology, such as Kevin Pho, M.D., a pioneering physician blogger and namesake of the popular KevinMD.com.

"I don't have any delusions of grandeur about my overall success or influence in this space," Dr. Beckerman says. "Compared to many other online physician experts, I am just getting started."

But his message and his online presence as a Providence cardiologist are gaining momentum. In February 2009 he signed a deal with New York publisher Simon & Schuster to write a book about heart health and weight loss, an opportunity that Dr. Beckerman credits primarily to his exposure as a WebMD expert.

As his digital media adventure continues to unfold, Dr. Beckerman is not certain where it will lead next. What he does know is that his breaking news tweets will have to be boiled down to 140 characters or less. ■

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James Beckerman, M.D.

twitter



Login Join Twitter!

Hey there! jamesbeckerman is using Twitter.

Twitter is a free service that lets you keep in touch with people through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What's happening? Join today to start receiving jamesbeckerman's tweets.



jamesbeckerman

Thanks! RT @... "Wellness is a verb, not as a target, but as a goal that has no end." h...

about 21 hours

Modern medicine... attack survivors' side - http://b... about 21 hours ago

Lots of people asking... don't recommend it! 4:30 PM Feb 22nd

tweeting

to your heart's content

Throughout the day, cardiologist James Beckerman, M.D., serves up free heart-healthy tidbits to anybody who wants to tune in on Twitter (www.twitter.com/jamesbeckerman). Here's a sample:

- "Getting your fats straight"
- "Great Runner's World story on core training"
- "Chocolate reduces strokes"
- "Espresso cuts coronary blood flow?"
- "Herbal remedies can be dangerous when taken with heart drugs"
- "Fit versus fat – a relevant debate in the elderly"
- "One in five teenagers have elevated cholesterol – we need to start screening at younger ages"
- "Restaurant food has up to 200% more calories"
- "Obesity overtakes smoking as health burden in U.S."
- "Resistant to aspirin? How about some fish?"

Not familiar with Twitter? Go to www.twitter.com/about to learn more.