

Letter to the Editor

Re: Use of WhatsApp in an oral and maxillofacial surgery department at a major trauma centre and its role during major incidents: our experience

Sir,

It was with great interest that we read the article by Dungalwalla et al¹ on their experience with the WhatsApp instant messaging service. We also use this “app” to maintain communication between dental core trainees, specialty registrars and consultants. Whilst we find it to be a useful and easy way of communicating and sharing information, we would also like to highlight some of the dangers associated with its use.

We have found that because of the application’s “informal” atmosphere, trainees can share irrelevant information, and the line between work and personal life can occasionally become blurred. As a result, our WhatsApp groups have sometimes been flooded with nonsensical messages regarding more personal matters.

Several people can send and receive information in a WhatsApp group, which means that a large amount of that information will not be relevant to particular individuals in the group. Information overload can be both distracting and disruptive during the working day, and it can have potentially adverse effects outside of work. Some of our trainees and consultants have mentioned how they find it difficult to disconnect from work while at home or on holidays, and can even feel anxious if they see a message in the group pertaining to a patient under their care.

Other studies have reported on the disadvantages of using WhatsApp in clinical practice. These include frequent interruptions, inconsistencies in the sense or degree of urgency, which may be overplayed by juniors, the potential to worsen professional relationships and even lead to unprofessional behaviour,² and the risk of reducing the autonomy of registrars.³ More importantly, perhaps, is the difficulty in identifying patients during WhatsApp conversations, as unique patient identifiers must not be used to maintain confidentiality.⁴ The wrong patient could be identified, leading to potentially serious consequences.

We feel WhatsApp will continue to be a valuable tool for communication in healthcare, but it should be used in

moderation and with due caution for the sharing of essential information only.

Conflict of interest

We have no conflicts of interest.

Ethics statement/confirmation of patient’s permission

No ethics approval required. No consent was required from the patient.

References

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