

**Katie Williams' report: summary of key points for ScotPHN from University of Portsmouth Undergraduate Student project.**  
**By Drew Millard**

This study had a wide remit, aiming to understand how the general public used the internet and electronic social media to access health information and to establish public health professionals' views on this and on how they could use these media to work together more effectively.

The report was completed by June 2011. There were two strands, the first looked at how the general public (in particular Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2000) were using the internet and social networking to find health information. This strand used literature review and an open online questionnaire. The second strand attempted to get an insight into public health professionals' views on how to use the internet to work with each other and to deliver health information to the general public and generation Y in particular. This used literature review to gain an understanding of the aims of public health and an online questionnaire targeted to twelve public health professionals linked to the Scottish Public Health Network (ScotPHN). The first sample was convenience, with 85 respondents, the second was purposive, seeking representation from public health and health promotion at a variety of levels, all 12 responded.

**The views of the general public and especially generation Y**

The sample was mainly from England, and 60% from London and the southeast part of the country. 75% of the respondents were from generation Y, (aged 18-40) and 79% were female. Respondents used a variety of networks, however Facebook was the clear leader with over 70% usage, followed by Twitter with over 30%. The main reasons for choice of network were ease of use and that the network had become part of the respondent's life. 96% had internet access at home. Time spent on line varied with only 2% spending less than an hour a day, 20% spending 6-8 hours and 11% over 8

hours. The main uses for the internet were work (over 50%), emailing (over 60%) and social networking (nearly 70%).

Of the 77 respondents who were users of social media, five (6.5%) (all female and spread through both younger and older people) had used a social network to find health information and self diagnose. Three of the five had concerns over the health information they received, for example being unsure of the reliability of the source. However 80 of the 85 respondents had used the internet to find health information. They used it because it was cheaper, quicker, and easier than getting an appointment with a doctor who would, increasingly these days be likely not to be their own family doctor, so not know their history, and because it was anonymous. Eight had bought medicines over the internet giving reasons such as it was less embarrassing. However, the majority of respondents would actually prefer to visit their GP rather than conduct self-diagnosis online.

#### The views of public health professionals

Of the 12 public health professionals (PHPs) six (50%) used social networks, all six used Facebook, though three had an additional twitter account. Although eight had at some time used social networking for work purposes, NHS firewalls blocked Facebook accounts, meaning they had to be used from home. This firewall problem also affected the online questionnaire, but was circumvented through email. PHPs saw these issues as important potential barriers to any hope that more use of social networking would increase awareness and engagement with the ScotPHN website, since Facebook had to be used from home. A way suggested around that would be to encourage PHPs to own and use their own smartphones. Alerts and discussion were seen as important in creating a fast paced and demanding communication environment.

The PHPs understood the importance of social networks as a work tool, but felt they needed proper investment, to develop a group of people who actively

populate the landscape, one mentioned linkedin. The PHPs viewed social networking as the most appropriate way to communicate with all, not just with young people, it was the new communication technology replacing email and must be embraced for potentially huge returns. The PHPs agreed that low public awareness of public health services limited their use. The PHPs largely agreed that members of social networking websites can share helpful advice for health-related issues. However, they also saw health information online as hugely variable, with the greatest issues being accuracy and trustworthiness.

Other unidentified research mentioned by a respondent to the professionals' survey corroborated the finding that the public social network users used them primarily for social and fun reasons rather than for finding health information.

There was a view among public health professionals that social networks will become an essential part of the way public health professionals work.

#### Responses on Social networking within Public Health

A voluntary organisation, Voluntary Health Scotland<sup>1</sup> replied it had used social networking as follows:

“NHS is currently exploring the use of social networking in information dissemination and networking within the third sector. We have 300 members and up to 2,000 stakeholders and it seems essential to do this. We now have a Facebook page. To date we have mainly focused on our website (300,000 hits/month) and e-news dissemination (1,800 addresses through DotMailer).”

Responses to key Social Networking questions are summarised and given in full below:

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.vhscotland.org.uk/>

**Question : By using social networking and pushmail technologies, how could the number of hits to the ScotPHN website be increased?**

These replies emphasise how the importance of social media for some contrasts with lack of knowledge (eg of pushmail) by others, but a link between social networks and websites certainly seems to be the consensus suggestion:

Creating a more active social networking community in public health, who share material such as this.
Email and other PC-related tools are on decline. Social media is the new communication methodology and MUST be embraced. It is NOT just for young people as middle aged are the fastest growing demographic!
Ignore at your peril - engage and embrace for potentially huge returns.
By making the information relevant, current and interesting and by marketing it widely.
<i>[no answer]</i>
No idea
Focus on topical issues and highlight newsworthy events and publications.
no idea
Not sure which demographics this might work for.
<i>[no answer]</i>
by marketing the type of info, health campaigns, etc that ScotPHN has available
Don't know what pushmail is. Links to the website from social networking sources could increase hits. Functionality of the website and access to useful resources on it would also increase use.
Postings on social networking sites can link respondents effectively to websites

**Question: How do you think that use of the Internet, and specifically social media, could aid ScotPHN in communicating with a wider audience of public health professionals?**

Here we can see some reservations around lack of access to social networking through NHS computers, but also an emphasis on the importance of content-rich media combining a Scottish news, chat, specialist articles, and use of professional networking sites such as LinkedIn:

Should be a part of the mix, quick alerts, generating debate etc
See above!
As above and linking into the wider Public Health workforce including those who do tremendous work in the voluntary sector
<i>[no answer]</i>
Not sure it would as social media not able to be used by most at work.
Perhaps use of a more chatty comment and discussion regular column. Also perhaps local (Scottish) public health news. simple and chatty articles and items for academics, DPHs,

public health specialists and practitioners about areas of interest. Cross reference to other websites and events such as ScotPHO.
Many of the newly qualified health professionals have grown up with social media and feel very comfortable with its use. So any way of connecting through that would widen the audience.
I think promoting the site in connection with training and promotion of resources is a useful way of engaging with people in a joined up way.
<i>[no answer]</i>
<i>[no answer]</i>
Use of professional networking sites, e.g. LinkedIn, could be useful. Discussion forums could be beneficial for people working on similar work across different settings.
Could be a great array of useful tools, but it would require the wider audience of health professionals to be making extensive use of smartphone technologies, as PC set-ups usually block Facebook etc.

**Question : What ideas can you suggest involving social networking that would provide the most successful way to target this audience?**

Again content is seen as the key, this time through alerts to other content available on the internet, such as journal papers etc through twitter. Enabling access to the ScotPHN website through links on staffnet pages was a good idea. Pushmail on a regular basis along the lines of the BMA model, and secure discussion forums that can be accessed from work. The SIGN model could be examined to see how it could be adapted to a ScotPHN use, maybe though making key public health tools or information available in a mobile format for access by mobile phone:

Needs proper investment and development of a group of people who actively 'populate' the landscape e.g. twitter, Linked in etc
By raising awareness of journal articles, research, evaluations, etc and twittering the links, they can be on people's phones in seconds, and viral within hours or minutes.
Consider youtube as possible outlet for seminars etc as well.
facebook pages, twitter, daily blogs, weekly alerts with relevant up to date research, information re training and conferences, peer group (topic) based discussions, sharing of good practice, consultation events etc etc. Have direct links to Scotphn in staffnet pages in NHS etc
<i>[no answer]</i>
Would need to revise most board's policies on social networking to make successful
Make access easy and push some emails out but on a regular basis. I think that the BMA emails and links to the BMA website are an excellent example. Good balance of the serious with the news items with the more social. The BMA news review is the written version but I now read the electronic and the email on its own is self standing.
Not confident enough as a social networker to give suggestions but always willing to learn.
At the moment we don't know the best way to engage with different demographics regards social networking, more research is required. Social marketing techniques are also useful.
<i>[no answer]</i>
<i>[no answer]</i>

Discussion forums could be useful – these would need to be on a site that can be accessed from work and be secure/private so that people could discuss issues openly.
---

Suggest ScotPHN talks to SIGN ( <a href="http://www.sign.ac.uk">www.sign.ac.uk</a> ) about its development of SIGNapps for clinicians
---

Suggest start with Facebook and evaluate effect
---

### Comparisons

The public were somewhat more optimistic than the PHPs about the reliability of health information available online, and on whether social networks can provide helpful advice for solving health related problems, but the majority in both groups were neutral on both topics (neither agreed or disagreed). While the public had a simple understanding of public health as being to improve the health of the public, among PHPs this study found less consensus that there was a simple definition of public health.

### Conclusion

The ScotPHN website is public facing, not an intranet, so should not of itself bar access from social e-networks. Possibly the ScotPHN site could have a public information dimension, which might amount to a role in accrediting the reliability of other sources of public health information for the public (e.g. on healthy lifestyles, healthy places, healthy parenting). Access would perhaps need to be facilitated to members of the public who had less than the appropriate levels of literacy, and computer and health literacy. Part of the ScotPHN website role could be to raise public awareness of the aims of public health (that it is about prevention of ill health and improvement of health and wellbeing rather than the treatment of health problems) and to generate more consensus on an interpretation of these aims by PHPs for the general public. The report commented on the traditional look of the ScotPHN website, the lack of colour, which might attract young people, and the low use of the discussion boards. The report suggests making the functionality of the type of interactive set up to be more like that of a 'facebook for healthcare' and including a twitter button (a link and preview widget) on the site.

Using social media to increase Public Health professionals networking was understood and seen as valuable by PHPs, but felt to need appropriate investment and as requiring the use of smart phones and the creation of a group of individuals who would organise the sending of alerts and initiation of discussion to create a fast moving and demanding environment. There is a question of whether professionals e-networking in this way can and should be made open to the general public, are there any advantages to doing so (e.g. raising awareness of public health) and if not what parts should be secure, and how they can be made so.

#### Further Note

LinkedIn (mentioned by one respondent) may be the most appropriate network for PHPs to network among themselves, as it has a social-professional dimension. Perhaps advantageously for work on the wider determinants of health this is not limited to a narrowly defined public health profession. Uses include finding colleagues, hearing about jobs. NHS firewalls apply to it as they do to others, but gated access where 'contact with any professional requires either a preexisting relationship, or the intervention of a contact of theirs is intended to build trust among the service's users'.<sup>2</sup>

LinkedIn also supports the formation of interest groups. Groups may be private, accessible to members only or may be open to Internet users in general to read. Twitter users can restrict messages they send to only their followers. However, the advice to start with facebook and evaluate the effect may be wise as it comes from VHS, who have over 300 social networking platforms linked to their website. In the admittedly small sample of 12 PHPs, facebook had the largest number of users as well as having most among the public.

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LinkedIn>