



# What You Don't Know About Texting Can Hurt You

You need to analyze strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

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**D**o you utilize text messages to communicate with patients, staff, or other medical providers? Technology has significantly changed the way we communicate. We have numerous methods of communication including mail, fax, telephone and voice messages. We also have social media, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and other social media platforms. And we have texting applications.

Each of these methods of communication has its place, but it is important to understand the 1) strengths, 2) weaknesses, 3) opportunities, and 4) threats associated with each of the methods of communication. In business this is known as a SWOT analysis.

When we communicate it is important to understand the purpose and goal of the communication. This article will focus on the use of text messaging for professional communications. We will start with the strengths of texting.

## Strengths

Text messaging is direct; we can get the message to our intended audience quickly, and put it on a device that the receiver probably has in his/her hands right now. By sending a text message, we are likely to get a relatively quick response. Texting is also asynchronous. If the person is not available to view the text immediately, the message will sit on their cell phone, readily available for them

to view the message. They do not have to log into their email system, listen to their voice mail, or take any additional steps to get access to the message you sent.

When you send a text, it is tagged to you. This makes it easy for the receiver to respond to you. This combination of factors makes texting a very attractive method of communication and allows the rapid

exchange of thoughts and ideas. Text messaging also allows for the sending of attachments such as images and sound files that enhance the content of the message.

where due diligence in reviewing and editing your text messages is important to ensure the correct message is sent to the recipient. One of the major weaknesses of text messaging is the lack of an audit trail. Once a text message is deleted from a device, it is gone forever. When communicating patient medical information, it is vital to capture all information as part of the

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## Weaknesses

Text messaging also has its weaknesses. If you utilize voice to text, you may have noticed that your cell phone has the ability to create what could be amusing and potentially embarrassing text messages that you can send with the push of a button. If you utilize your phone keyboard, you may find that the small keyboard may be difficult to manage, and that typos can abound (auto correct helps with many of these typos but autocorrect can also create amusing text messages when your phone makes incorrect assumptions). This creates an environment

patient's medical record. If you are seeking a consultation with another provider, the opinion rendered by the other provider should also become part of the patient's medical record as it is information that you may utilize in your clinical decision-making process.

There have been cases where a provider has communicated treatment information to a patient via text. The information on the text messages never made it into the medical record, and eventually a malpractice suit was filed against the provider. The patient was able to come into court with all of the text messages which were admitted into evidence, but the medical record did not have any of the information. This helped to cast a negative light on the defendant provider. Another weak-

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ness of texting is that SMS texting is not secure. Sending patient information via most text services that come built into cell phones is a violation of the HIPAA security rule. Texting clinical images associated with a text conversation is also a violation of the HIPAA security rule.

## Opportunities

Texting presents a great opportunity to communicate with patients and other providers should we utilize a texting application that:

- Captures all text conversations so that they can be incorporated into patients' medical records.
- Sends all information to the intended recipient in a secure and encrypted manner.

The promise of texting gives us the opportunity to improve communication, improve patient engagement, and as a result have better outcomes.

## Threats

The threat associated with utilizing texting applications that do not capture the information as part of the patient record and potentially expose patients' information to unauthorized individuals is real and happens on a regular basis.

So how should we utilize texting today? First and foremost, if the application is not secure, do not send patient information via a texting application. There are secure texting applications available, but they do require that both the sender and receiver have the secure application and use the application to both send and receive messages. The next important step you need to take is to capture all patient information and ensure that it gets inserted into your records so that you have the text conversations should it become necessary when defending yourself in a malpractice action.

Hopefully, in the not too distant future, we will have access to a secure

texting application that will capture all of the conversations and give us the ability to import those into our EHR. Until such an application is available, it is important to be aware of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with text messaging and then utilize text messaging in a manner that best enables us to communicate while protecting both ourselves and our patients. **PM**



**Dr. Michael Brody** has presented webinars for the e-Health initiative, ([www.ehealthinitiative.org/](http://www.ehealthinitiative.org/)) and is active in the EMR workgroup of the New York E Health Collaborative ([www.nyehealth.org/](http://www.nyehealth.org/)). He has provided consulting services to physicians for the implementation of EHR software and to EHR vendors to assist in making their products more compatible with CCHIT and HIPAA guidelines. Dr. Brody is a member of AAPP.

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