7 Electronic health communication

Peer-to-peer online interaction

Online peer-to-peer communication: challenges and opportunities

In this chapter we look at communication that takes place between people (peers) with different medical conditions when they join online support groups. Interactions with peers in self-management programmes offer people with different medical conditions the opportunity to share their concerns with similar others, in this way reducing the sense of isolation associated with many illnesses. Such interactions are typically a locus of social support defined as a 'transaction of empathy and concern, information and advice, or tangible aid (i.e., goods and services) between two or more individuals' and characterised by the use of verbal or nonverbal behaviours to seek or provide help (Mickelson, 1997: 157). Such support groups are particularly important for those who suffer from chronic illness as clinical research shows that interpersonal networks significantly impact on adaptation to the everyday management of disease. As the concept of supportive community is often deemed central to Internet-based interactions, it is not surprising that participation in online support communities has been hailed as holding a great potential for its therapeutic benefits. With the likely increase of such communications through dedicated websites and social networking possibilities in the modern era of the Internet, there is a growing need for health professionals and researchers to understand and evaluate such interactions.

In order to harness any potential therapeutic benefits of online interaction and networking, it is particularly important to understand the rhetorical challenges faced by those who decide to participate in such online groups, as well as the processes through which norms of particular online communities develop. In this chapter we will therefore review some of the current literature on online social support and then use different applied linguistic tools to explore the multitude of ways that people who have never met in person use the electronic medium to seek and offer support on physical and emotional health problems.