Eight Years of AJKD Blog—Lessons Learned and What Lies Ahead

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In 2012, AJKD launched its official blog, then named eAJKD, by gathering a team of experienced nephrology educators and bloggers to create an online platform to complement the traditional journal. AJKD Blog (https://ajkdblog.org/), as the site came to be known 2 years later, has sustained and increased the online presence for the journal. Beyond this, it has served as a base for many social media endeavors, a training ground for novel forms of education, and a space for mentorship and collaboration. Now that we have completed 8 years of blog operations, we look back at the progress that has been made, the lessons learned, and what lies ahead for AJKD Blog.

AJKD pioneered an online platform at a time when virtually none existed. In 2012, no nephrology journals had blogs, and less than 10% of general internal medicine journals with an impact factor greater than 4.0 operated blogs. Today there are a multitude of freely available nephrology resources of varying quality and many medical journals have grown their online presence. AJKD remains committed to creation of consistent, user-friendly, and high-quality content. In no small part this is due to the editorial board’s foresight to bring in educators with social media experience from the very beginning. One of the core missions at launch was to enrich AJKD’s journal content by allowing users to engage with the material more casually. As social media is innately interactive and driven by discussion between content creators and consumers, this was a perfect fit. While the physical journal is the home of the journal’s more regimented content, the blog serves as the base for commentaries, quizzes, puzzles, and author interviews related to select articles. Another key feature was AJKD Blog’s free availability, which allowed readers who were not subscribers to the journal to engage with relevant journal content. To maintain quality, content is internally peer reviewed by the social media editor.

Growth and Integration

Blog content is a key means to increase awareness of the journal, but AJKD has also established a presence on multiple social media platforms. Twitter and Facebook profiles were created in that first year and have been integral in driving traffic to the blog. Instagram was added in 2016. In 2018, the blog surpassed 1 million total views, and to date it has created more than 1,300 posts that directly promote the journal’s content. As AJKD continues to accumulate followers, likes, and retweets, we also see the reach of the journal expand beyond the United States. Globally, the blog has seen its most impressive growth in India, the United Kingdom, Mexico, and Australia. Unfortunately, social media metrics are not able to directly establish contributions to traditional journal measurements such as Impact Factor or h-index. Nonetheless, we believe the use of a blog is an important part of our outreach and dissemination of impactful research, policy, and educational material contained in the parent journal.

In an effort to consistently improve the blog, content and layout are regularly evaluated. Online metrics including page views, traffic to the original publication, Twitter engagement, and Facebook likes for each blog piece are compiled. Over the past several years, novel types of content have been trialed to identify what resonates with our audience of learners (Fig 1). These include visual abstracts, which summarize Original Investigation articles in graphical format. A dedicated visual abstract team was assembled for the journal’s editorial board in 2017, but given the success of visual abstracts on the blog and as graphical depictions of clinical research have gained momentum in recent years, authors are now invited to submit their own visual abstracts, and these now appear at the end of article PDFs when downloaded.

Another innovation is #PathPointers, blog posts that highlight important everyday teaching points pertaining to histology by using real clinical cases and images to demonstrate various kidney biopsy findings. A dedicated team of nephropathologists was created in 2017 to create, edit, and roll this feature out for the blog. This particular feature incorporates learning points from the journal’s “Atlas of Renal Pathology” but delivers them with case vignettes in more focused and digestible segments, illustrating how a digital educational component can complement the parent journal.

In 2018, plain-language summaries from Original Investigation articles were introduced on the blog. These monthly highlights allow authors to describe what inspired their study, their approach, what was learned, and why it matters to readers. As with the visual abstracts, plain-language summaries are now included in the formal journal articles as well.

More Than Just a Blog

In addition to journal-related content, the blog is the home for many other social media endeavors, including live coverage of the American Society of Nephrology’s Kidney Week, the National Kidney Foundation’s Spring Clinical Meetings, KidneyCon, and more. AJKD Blog has also become an instructional space for the Nephrology Social
Media Collective internship. As part of this year-long experience to develop social media skills, interns create content under the supervision of an experienced mentor to deliver a product that highlights a journal article. Similarly, in 2018, AJKD established its own editorial internship for nephrology fellows, and part of their experience involves participating in the journal’s social media presence.

One of the most unique and exciting aspects for the blog occurs each March, when the website becomes the central hub of #NephMadness. NephMadness is an educational online initiative that is modeled after the US college basketball tournament March Madness, but with nephrology topics instead of teams. Throughout the 9 years of NephMadness, more than 250 free, peer-reviewed features were created and continue to be hosted on the blog, covering topics ranging from the newest updates in transplantation to how toad bladders contributed to our understanding of collecting duct physiology. Over the years, this interactive event has grown and evolved, now offering both continuing medical education (CME) and maintenance of certification (MOC) credits for participants. More importantly, it has become a unique learning activity for trainees, and shines a positive spotlight on the friendly competition that can exist between academic training programs. NephMadness has also been featured in venues outside of nephrology, such as the popular internal medicine podcast, The Curbsiders. This partnership has allowed nephrology topics to gain the attention of an even wider audience.

Lessons Learned and Forecasting the Future
AJKD Blog has always been willing to trial various media platforms to deliver its content. Diversity in formats has been a staple since the inception of the blog, when it included live meeting coverage, interviews, quizzes, and puzzles beyond its commentaries. Additions over the years include audio podcasts and video interviews with authors. Keeping in mind what has allowed the endeavor to be successful in the past, we now look to take AJKD Blog into a new decade. The aim is to continue creating content that appeals to both nephrology trainees and practicing clinicians. Doing this involves using technology as it changes for both teachers and learners while embracing best practices in an increasingly virtual environment. Simultaneously, given the reality of a pandemic that has made remote learning the norm, we are aware that everyone is spending more time behind a computer. The challenge for us is to deliver user-friendly material that minimizes screen fatigue while still preserving scientific rigor.

Several formats to achieve these goals have been implemented already. These include video-based reviews for Core Curriculum content, podcasts for features such as “In Practice,” and audio interviews for “In A Few Words” personal essays. Newer pilots being proposed include “audiovisual abstracts,” or short video segments reviewing the findings of Original Investigations and their potential impact. The creation of an Engagement Editor within the journal’s infrastructure enables innovative ways to engage communities and amplify the patient voice. Lastly, we must keep sight of one of our most important goals, which is to draw attention to our field for the next generation. Be it clinical research, installments in the Core Curriculum feature, policy updates, or any of the other content in the journal, we must be thinking forward on how to maximize access to potential trainees. As was stated in an early piece on the blog, the internet is not static, nor shall we be. What lies ahead is not set in stone in such a dynamic medium and quickly changing time, but rest assured the AJKD team is continuing to work hard to deliver into the next decade!
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