



Biomedical and Health Informatics Lecture Series

**Tuesday, January 3, 2012
12:00 - 12:50 p.m., Room T-360**

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“Information sharing and collaborative technologies: The power of peer support in online health communities”

Sharing personal health information is an important means for patients to obtain social support and to learn from peers with similar circumstances. From *PatientsLikeMe* to *Facebook*, people are adopting health-specific and general-purpose tools to collaborate with peers by sharing experiential wisdom drawn from their health experiences (‘patient expertise’). Although advances in collaborative technologies make sharing easier, challenges persist: managing privacy, misinformation, poorly fitting advice, forging relationships, and understanding community structure. To address these challenges, we must focus on patient-centered enhancements to collaborative technologies through a deep understanding of patients’ sharing needs. In this talk I will discuss three research projects that deepen our understanding of patients’ support needs for expertise sharing in peer networks. First, I will present work to characterize patient expertise as distinct from the medical expertise of health professionals, to describe how patients locate peers for expertise, and to facilitate expertise sharing through the participatory design of an expertise locator for online health communities. Second, I will discuss a project newly funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to facilitate peer mentoring in online health communities. In this work, we are developing, implementing, and evaluating social matching tools that profile and recommend matched peers based on their community contributions (e.g., posts). Finally, I will briefly cover ongoing research funded by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to develop visual ‘dashboards’ that track a patient’s quality of life (e.g., side effects) in the context of quality of life data contributed by similar patients. These three projects illustrate ways to overcome challenges of sharing information in peer networks so that we can help patients help each other.

Andrea Hartzler received a BS in Psychology and a PhD in Biomedical Information from the University of Washington. She completed her dissertation thesis and postdoctoral research with Wanda Pratt. Andrea’s primary research interest is in understanding and supporting everyday management of personal health information. She has a particular interest in information sharing and collaborative technology driven by her passion to help people help each other through shared wisdom about personal health.

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