



ADSA SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION GUIDELINE

*electronic communication,
social media and ethics*



definitions

Advertising: According to the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), in relation to any health establishment, orthodox medicine, complementary medicine, medical device, scheduled substance or health-related product or service, "advertising" refers to any written, pictorial, visual or other descriptive matter or verbal statement or reference in respect thereof that appears in a newspaper, magazine, pamphlet, website, social media space or other publications; or it is distributed to members of the public or is brought to the attention of members of the public in any manner. The intention is to promote the sale of the orthodox medicine, complementary medicine, medical device, scheduled substance or health-related product, or to direct the public to any particular health establishment or health-related service.¹

Canvassing: According to the HPCSA, canvassing is a conduct, which draws attention, either verbally or by means of printed or electronic media, to your personal qualities, superior knowledge, quality of service, professional guarantees or best practice.²

Defamation: Behaviour or activity that harms the reputation of a colleague or healthcare professional.³ This includes making comments about colleagues that cannot be fully justified.⁴

Electronic communication: The electronic transmission of information that has been encoded digitally. Electronic devices such as computers and cellphones are used to transmit the data. This can be done via social media websites (public domain), or on a one-to-one and one-to-group basis (private domain) by means of email, calls, video calls, group calls, text messages, instant messages (WhatsApp or Skype), or group messages.^{5,6}

Endorsement: According to the HPCSA, endorsement is any action whereby a person or professional body attaches approval to or sanctions any health establishment or orthodox medicine, complementary medicine, medical device, scheduled substance or health-related product or service with a view to encourage or promote the preferential use or sale thereof for the purpose of financial gain or valuable consideration.¹

Ethics: The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.⁵

Healthcare professional: Any person registered in terms of the applicable Act, which governs the functioning of any of the Councils that form part of the Forum of Statutory Health Councils. This includes persons registered with the HPCSA. The term also refers to students within health care.¹

Social media: The forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content such as videos.⁵

Social media accounts/platforms



Blogs (www.blog.com) A regularly updated website, usually maintained by an identified individual or organisation, with regular posts of commentary, descriptions of events and other material, such as images or videos. Many blogs are interactive, which allows visitors to leave comments or send messages to each other.



Facebook (www.facebook.com) A networking site with over 1 billion users. Users must register and create a personal profile. They can then add other users as "friends" and communicate via inbox messages, direct posts or comments. "Friends" receive notifications when other "friends" update their profiles. In addition, users may join or create common-interest groups, organised by workplace, and for example, can organise their "friends" into categories such as "people from work".



Google+ (www.plus.google.com) A website that enables users to be located by friends, clients, patients or colleagues; to communicate with friends, clients, patients or colleagues face-to-face (video); and to gain insights into the impact of the social connection.



LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) A website with over 200 million professional members that offers features aimed at establishing professional networks, in order to exchange information, ideas and information about opportunities



Twitter (www.twitter.com) A real-time information network that connects users to the latest stories, ideas, opinions and news about what they find interesting. It permits users to post information up to 140 characters long, which can include images, videos and conversations directly in Tweets to get the whole story at a glance, and all in one place. There are over 200 million active users and twitter handles more than 1.6 billion searches a day.



You tube (www.youtube.com) A subsidiary of Google, where users are allowed to freely upload, view and share originally created videos.

Touting: According to the HPCSA, touting is conduct which draws attention, either verbally or by means of printed or electronic media, to one's offers, guarantees or material benefits that do not fall in the categories of professional services or items, but are linked to the rendering of a professional service or designed to entice the public to the professional practice.²

introduction

Social media are the new ways of communicating.^{3,7} Thoughts and information can be shared as fast as they can be typed.³ Social media have changed the way people and professionals obtain, share, publish and discuss information.⁷ Social media can also be defined as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking". Social media include blogs; podcasts; discussion forums; collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia); social networking sites (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn); content communities (e.g. YouTube); virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life); and virtual game worlds. The most popular online activity to date is social networking. The use of email and telephone calls has become less popular, especially amongst the youth, whereas a rapid growth in the use of social media is astonishing.^{3,7,8} An increase in social networking for trade and as a business platform has been observed.

Social media are appropriate platforms for sharing various types of information from general nutritional messages and sound, scientifically based dietary advice, to utilising or sharing a recipe with someone.⁸

The pros and cons of social media and electronic communication

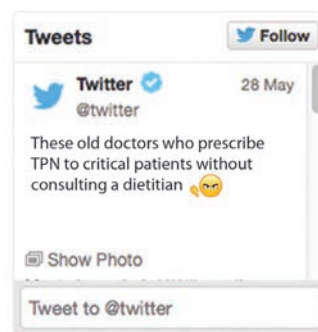
Social media offer healthcare professionals a means to communicate with a large audience quickly and conveniently.³ If used appropriately, social media may benefit patients, consumers and healthcare professionals. Healthcare organisations or professionals can establish peer-to-peer connections or professional-to-patient or consumer connections. Patients and families can find support and guidance on consumer-to-consumer websites. Websites can also provide information in the form of participant blogs or forums, which can be used for research purposes.⁸ In addition, private consultations with clients or patients can

take place via electronic communication, such as phone or video calls on Skype or Facetime. It is, however, important that clients are informed that they will be billed for these sessions according to the healthcare professional's practice policy. This information should be communicated before the consultation.

On the other hand, social media carry both professional and personal risks, despite the current absence of a social media constitution.³ Social media have also challenged the concept of what is rightfully "private" or "public". The inappropriate utilisation of social media poses potential dangers, such as the replacement of face-to-face or phone interaction, and an uncertainty or false impression of digital interactions.⁹ In addition, online behaviour might be perceived in general as unprofessional, inappropriate and offensive. Possible examples of inappropriate interactions on social media include an incident where a healthcare professional posted pictures on a social media site of a patient before and after weight loss without consent, "befriending" a former patient or posting photos of jokes or pranks made at the workplace during work hours. With respect to Twitter, behaviour considered unprofessional is generally based on privacy violations or unprofessional comments. Simply using common sense may, however, diminish the risks.

Healthcare professionals must be aware of the possible legal risks associated with the violation of confidentiality or privacy, plagiarism or defamation.

Example:



Think before you post, text or speak – confidentiality and privacy


Practising as a healthcare professional is based upon a relationship of mutual trust between patients and healthcare professionals. Healthcare professionals have moral and ethical duties to others and society. A core ethical value and standard of a healthcare professional is treating information confidentially. Healthcare professionals should treat personal or private information, including the patient's name, address, birth date, images and associated health conditions, as confidential. That is, unless there are overriding reasons that confer a moral or legal right to disclose information to a third party.^{2,4} The overriding reasons for breaching confidentiality are not applicable to social media. The healthcare professional should disclose any possible reasons that may limit their ability to guarantee full confidentiality.⁸

Individuals may self-publish their own information. However, that does not give the healthcare professional any right to use this published information. In the case of provider organisations, such as hospitals or groups of privately practising professionals, electronic health records, including personal health records and patient portals, are governed by strict standards to ensure the privacy and security of health information.⁸

It is recommended that text messaging should not be used for sending medical information, except if the patient gives consent. Healthcare professionals should still, however, use caution.⁹

In summary, you should never share private or personal information about your patients, clients, colleagues or co-workers without consent. Ensure that patients cannot be identified by the sum of information you post online, even if posted at different times or on different social media platforms or accounts.⁷ In addition, if informed consent is obtained, the patient, client or colleague must be informed if the specific information consented to is shared.

Example: A dietitian working at a clinic posted a comment regarding an adverse outcome experienced by one of her patients on Facebook. She did not indicate the patient's name or diagnosis or which hospital was involved, but she forgot that her location setting was still on after her weekend away. Therefore, with her comment her location was posted as a well-known infertility clinic.



where do we draw the line between our professional and personal lives?

Social media make it challenging to distinguish between your personal and professional lives.⁷ Unprofessional interactions or content may reflect poorly on your practice or the profession as a whole. As a healthcare professional, first consider the situation you are in. There should be a clear distinction between your professional and personal opinions and the scientifically correct information.⁸ In addition, you as a healthcare professional should bear in mind that you are always representing your profession.⁷

Ways of maintaining a distinction between your personal and professional lives, without having to completely avoid personal communication, include the following:

- Set up a separate professional and personal platform or account, or have a separate personal and professional telephone number, Skype address or email account.
- Keep your professional brand consistent throughout the multiple accounts or platforms used.
- Set up privacy settings on personal platforms or accounts.
- Be cautious when permitting location settings. You may unwillingly, reveal where you live or where you currently are.⁷



professional responsibility

Once information is posted, it is “out there” and it has a digital footprint. One no longer has complete control over the information.⁸ Professional standards can be maintained by following these guidelines:

- All information posted should be credible and suitable for the audience. Caution must be taken when responding to direct requests for nutritional advice on social media. They are not platforms for individual counselling or sharing information that may violate a patient’s privacy.⁸
- If communication should continue on the social media platform, an alternative is to redirect the patient or client on appropriate websites, or to provide him or her with your contact details. Caution must be exercised if one has been contacted electronically by a person who has had no previous interaction with the healthcare professional. The healthcare professional should ideally only provide contact details, in order to schedule an appointment.⁹
- Do not engage in any false or misleading communication. Be honest! Clearly state whether you are representing yourself as an individual, or as a company or organisation. In some instances, you may prefer to share a link to information or the details of a reputable organisation as it is less risky to refer the follower or friend to a third party resource, than to give an inappropriate professional opinion.^{7,8}
- Restrict yourself to your level of expertise or subject of interest. Ensure that all the scientifically correct facts are at hand before posting any information. The content posted should be held to the same professional standards as peer-reviewed publications. Online credibility is essential for maintaining a professional perception of the healthcare professional.^{7,8}
- Place a disclaimer on your social media accounts about the scope of the nutritional news and tips you provide.^{3,7} For example: “The information on Health24 is for educational purposes only, and is not intended as medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. If you are experiencing symptoms or need health advice, please consult a healthcare professional.¹⁰


- Do not respond if in doubt. Be honest and indicate that you are not completely sure about an answer.
- Take responsibility for the information posted. If an error was made, be the first to respond to the mistake. Acknowledge the error and correct it as soon as possible. Respect a difference of opinion.^{7,8}
- Acknowledge and respect contributions made by colleagues or original resources consulted.^{7,8} Failure to do so is technically a form of plagiarism and a breach of the copyright laws.³ Be familiar with the basics of copyright, privacy and data protection regulations before using images or content from the web. Many images may not be used without permission, and in some instances, royalties have to be paid.⁷
- If you come across a posting of inappropriate content by a colleague, let the colleague know in a discreet and appropriate manner. In addition, advise colleagues who are impaired to seek professional assistance.^{4,11} Consider a private off-line communication or direct message if an issue has arisen about a patient or another party, or if there is a problem with content that has been posted.
- Do not engage in any behaviours that may harm the reputation of your colleagues or the profession (i.e. defamation). Think before you post!^{1,11}
- Clearly state and display potential or actual conflicts of interest. Be transparent about financial interests in institutions, products or equipment that may exist. Disclose your relationship with the sponsoring entity and, in the case of consulting work, your relationship with corporate clients on your blog, tweets or any other social media platforms. Take appropriate action whenever conflict arises.^{4,7,8}
- Avoid remarks that are negative, offensive, untruthful, threatening, discriminatory or demeaning.⁷
- Search for your name, practice or organisation on a regular basis to assess the web-based contents associated with you. Ensure that your profile and the information posted on it is of high standard and up to date.⁷ In addition, ensure that the security settings allow you to continue reaching the intended audience.
- Maintain professionalism whilst conversing with patients by email, text message, WhatsApp, phone or Skype call. Face-to-face communication does, however, remain the ideal means of communication, and enables easier treatment and follow-up.
- Healthcare professionals should have a billing policy addressing consultation calls in place, and they should inform patients or clients about this. Patients or clients should agree with the billing policy before the consultation can commence. For example, patients or clients may be charged for a consultation call, but not for newsletters sent via email, or a text message sent to remind the patient or client of their next appointment. In addition they should not be charged if the healthcare professional needs to seek advice about the condition from a colleague or another appropriate source.

personal responsibility

The healthcare professional has a life-long responsibility to continue acquiring knowledge and skills consistent with professional standards. This means being up to date about the latest information about a subject area, and acquiring competence in the use of technology. New technologies or forms of social media require new skills.⁸

Healthcare professionals may share their personal information at their own discretion. However, they must endeavour to portray a positive, enthusiastic image of what it is that dietitians do.⁷

When is it appropriate to make use of social media? Many organisations block access to social media sites during office hours. However, most workers have access to social media on their mobile devices, and accessing these sites may disrupt their office routine. Therefore, healthcare professionals must be mindful of



their employers' policies and their professional presence at work when considering the use of social media during work hours.

In addition to this, dietitians should set boundaries regarding their availability to patients or clients who have access to telephone numbers or Skype addresses, in order to maintain their privacy. They may, however, receive an urgent request for help from a patient or client that is in desperate need of a response. All "Good Samaritan" acts, undertaken in the best interests of the patient are a professional obligation.

Advertising, social media and electronic communication

Social media serve as vehicles for marketing. Most healthcare professionals, organisations and providers now have websites, or social media platforms that can be used for advertising purposes provided that the advertisement meets the conditions of the HPCSA ethics code.

According to the HPCSA ethics code, healthcare professionals are not allowed to advertise, endorse or encourage the use of any healthcare establishment, orthodox medicine, complementary medicine, medical device, scheduled substance or health-related product or service in a way that unfairly promotes the practice of a particular healthcare professional or facility for the purpose of financial gain or other valuable consideration.¹ For example, Google advertising under another "popular" dietitian's name is not permitted.

Healthcare professionals are, however, allowed to advertise their services or permit authorisation or consent to such advertisements, provided that the advertisement is not unprofessional, untruthful, deceptive or misleading, or causes the public unwarranted anxiety. The healthcare professional is not allowed to canvass or tout, or allow canvassing or touting to be done on his/her behalf.² A simple example is stating academic achievements or "superior knowledge" such as cum laude on a professional social media profile or account. However, drawing attention to the practice with notifications of superior knowledge or better pricing is regarded as inappropriate and unethical behaviour.

Healthcare professionals working for a supplement company or organisation may have a professional profile or account linking them to this company or organisation. If that is the case, on their social media platforms they should clearly state conflicts of interest, the nature of the relationship with the company or organisation, and whether they are representing themselves as an individual or the company or organisation. They should, however, avoid any personal involvement in promoting the services of the company or organisation, for example, by posting their own social media profiles on the company or organisation's behalf.

Example:

A profile celebrating an event such as World Nutrition Day can be created on Facebook, for example. A request can be sent to all friends, fans or followers, encouraging them to get involved in the creative activities that will take place on this day, in order to promote nutrition as a whole.

When a personal image is used as a profile picture or as part of an advertisement, it is recommended that the healthcare professional should endeavour to achieve and maintain a professional identity. Ideally, as demonstrated in figure 1, he or she should dress appropriately. For example, the shoulders should be covered, hair and make-up should be done professionally; and the lighting should be good. Figure 2 demonstrates an image with poor lighting. It is also recommended that a professional photographer be hired or, if that is not possible, the photographs can be taken at a photo shop where ID photos are taken and put on a disk for a much lower fee. Images taken in a social setting, such as on a beach holiday, or with sunglasses or unprofessional attire (Figure 3) should be avoided. Dietitians are healthcare professionals and it is vital that any images used depict this image.

In conclusion, social media have provided the professional sector with a whole new world of communication. If utilised appropriately, the benefits far outweigh the risks. The user must, however, understand that the published information has meaning and consequence, despite the way in which it is expressed. Therefore, in essence, THINK BEFORE YOU POST, TEXT OR SPEAK!

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Figure 1: An appropriate image of a healthcare professional.*



Figure 2: An inappropriate image of a healthcare professional, with poor lighting.*



Figure 3: An inappropriate image of a healthcare professional Note the the glass of wine, casual dress and the presence of a friend at her side.*

*Consent was obtained from the healthcare professional for the use of these images.