



College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia

Professional Guideline

Social Media

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Related topic(s):	Advertising and Communicating with the Public , Boundary Violations in the Patient-Physician Relationship , Emailing Patient Information , Photographic, Video and Audio Recording of Patients

A **professional guideline** reflects a recommended course of action established based on the values, principles and duties of the medical profession. Physicians may exercise reasonable discretion in their decision-making based on the guidance provided.

Registrants may seek advice on these issues by contacting the College and asking to speak with a member of the registrar staff, or by seeking medical legal advice from the CMPA.

PREAMBLE

This document is a professional guideline of the Board of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia.

COLLEGE'S POSITION

The term “social media” refers to web and mobile technologies and practices that people use to search for and share content, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives online.

Expectations of professional and ethical conduct are the same whether physicians are interacting in person, or online through social media. Physicians should be vigilant in avoiding online situations where it may be harmful to patients and detrimental to their own credibility and reputation.

The use of social media is expanding rapidly, blurring the boundaries between public and private space. Anything posted on social media lives in a virtual space and may end up in the public domain permanently, irrespective of the intent at the time of posting. Confidentiality can never be guaranteed.

From a legal standpoint, physicians should consider whether the content they publish violates patient privacy expectations, defamation, and plagiarism laws. From an ethical and professional standpoint, they should consider whether patient privacy expectations and confidentiality is being compromised.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE PROFESSIONALISM

1. Exercise caution when posting personal information on social media platforms. Do not post content that could be viewed as unprofessional. Assume content on the internet is public and widely accessible to all.
2. Maintain clear boundaries. Refrain from establishing personal connections with patients online. In some instances it may be acceptable to create an online connection with patients for professional purposes only.
3. Keep health information confidential. Always maintain the confidentiality of patient information and never post identifiable patient information or patient images to social media—even in a closed or private online forum.
4. Read, understand, and apply the strictest privacy settings to maintain control over access to your personal information. Be aware that privacy settings are imperfect and can be compromised.
5. Respect the privacy of patients, colleagues and co-workers. Respect others' privacy by carefully managing information acquired about them from social media. Do not search online sources for private patient information that has no relevance to the patient's clinical issue.
6. Know the laws and professional standards that govern your practice. Defamatory statements published online may result in allegations of libel or slander. Plagiarism and copyright infringement can also lead to legal action. Always provide credit and links back to original sources when sharing information. Represent your credentials accurately and declare conflicts of interest where applicable.

For more information on using social media in professional practice, review the CMPA's [Top 10 tips for using social media in professional practice](#).