Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Social Media by Physicians

Introduction

The term ‘social media’ refers to web and mobile technologies and practices that people use to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives online. There are many prominent examples of social media platforms; some of the most popular include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and blogging sites, among many others.

The nature of these platforms, which are highly accessible, informal, and public, raise important questions about the steps physicians should take in order to maintain professionalism while online. Social media can be harnessed to advance good medical care and medical education. It can also be an enjoyable source of entertainment and information. This document is intended to assist Ontario physicians in maintaining professionalism while engaging in social media in order to safeguard the best interests of their patients and the reputation of the medical profession.

Purpose

This document provides guidance for physicians about how best to engage in social media while protecting patient confidentiality and privacy, maintaining appropriate doctor-patient boundaries, avoiding conflicts of interest, and safeguarding the reputation of the medical profession. This document is not a policy; it does not establish any new expectations for physicians that are unique to the use of social media. Rather, the document clarifies how existing professional expectations apply to behaviour in the social media sphere and provides advice on steps physicians can take to uphold those expectations and to maintain online professionalism.

Principles

The College’s Practice Guide articulates the values of the medical profession and the principles of good medical practice. A number of principles from the Practice Guide are relevant to the use of social media by physicians, including the following:

- Physicians have a duty to safeguard patient privacy and confidentiality
- Physicians should be aware of boundary issues and the potential for transference in the doctor-patient relationship
- Physicians should guard against compromising their duty to their patients by pursuing personal advantage, whether financial or otherwise, at the expense of the patient
- Physicians should be collegial in their dealings with each other, other professionals, and in the public sphere
- Physicians have a responsibility to collaborate with other health care professionals for the purpose of information exchange
- Physicians should endeavour to teach and learn
College position on social media

The nature of social media presents some risks for physicians and patients alike. To manage these risks, physicians are expected to adhere to all of their existing professional expectations and duties including those set out in relevant legislation, regulations, codes of ethics, and College policies when they engage in the use of social media platforms and technologies. The College recognizes that if physicians adhere to relevant professional expectations when engaging in social media, these platforms also present important opportunities to enhance medical education, professional competence, and collegiality and can be an enjoyable source of information and entertainment.

Guidelines

When engaging in social media, physicians must continue to:

- Maintain appropriate professional boundaries between themselves and their patients
- Maintain patient confidentiality and trust by protecting patient information
- Maintain patient privacy
- Maintain collegial and respectful relationships with other members of the health care team including other physicians, hospital staff, volunteers, students, and all other individuals who contribute to health care delivery
- Avoid conflicts of interest

In order to satisfy the above professional expectations while engaging in social media, physicians are advised (to):

- Assume all content on the internet is public and accessible to all
- Remember that social media platforms are constantly evolving
- Refrain from invading a patient’s privacy by seeking out information about them that may be available online
- Refrain from posting identifying information about a patient in any context online including for example in a professional blog, video-sharing media, or discussion forum
- Avoid violating any laws including those related to defamation, copyright, and plagiarism when posting content in blogs or elsewhere online
- Apply the strictest privacy settings to protect your own information and information about you that could be posted by others
- Be mindful of your internet presence and be proactive in removing content which may be viewed as unprofessional
- Avoid providing medical advice online, for example, by posting information in an internet discussion forum that could be construed as medical advice. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate for physicians to provide health-related information in an online forum that is not patient-specific for the purpose of public or professional education.
- Avoid creating online social connections with patients or those closely associated with patients
- Proactively consider how other professional expectations apply to the use of social media
Endnotes:


ii College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, *Confidentiality of Personal Health Information Policy*, April 2006


vi Anecdotally, there are stories about physicians posting information about interesting cases online that could reasonably be attributed to a specific patient.

vii College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia, *Social Media and Online Networking Forums*, 2010

viii In this context we are not referring any secure online communications physicians may have with their patients, for information on these issues; please refer to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, *Medical Records Policy*, May 2012 for relevant requirements.