

# Social media guidance

A summary of guidance for healthcare professionals



## Advice for doctors on unlawful or unprofessional social media conduct

The General Medical Council (GMC) makes it very clear that the code of conduct for doctors should not change just because they are on social media. In the case that medical professionals do misbehave online, this could put their registration at risk.

The GMC has laid out the major issues surrounding doctors on social media, and what would constitute a breach of the rules.



## Treating colleagues fairly

Good medical practice sets out that professionals must treat colleagues fairly and with respect, and that they must ensure their conduct justifies their patients' trust in them and the public's trust in the profession.

When online therefore, doctors must not "bully, harass or make gratuitous, unsubstantiated or unsustainable comments about individuals online."

# Patient privacy

When communicating publicly, patient confidentiality must always be maintained.

The GMC document also sets out: **“You should remember when using social media that communications intended for friends or family may become more widely available.”**

Furthermore, when advertising services, doctors should ensure the information they publish is factual and can be checked. It must not exploit the vulnerability or lack of medical knowledge of patients.



When discussing confidentiality, the GMC notes that many improper disclosures are unintentional. With this in mind, identifiable information about patients should not be shared online.

## Don't mix social and professional relationships online

It is also noted that using social media can blur the lines between social and professional boundaries, stating that doctors must always make it clear to patients that they are not permitted to mix social and professional relationships through social media.







## Be clear about conflicts of interest

When posting material online, doctors must be open about any conflict of interest that could arise, and declare any financial or commercial interests in healthcare organisations or pharmaceutical and biomedical companies.

If you identify yourself as a doctor in social media that is accessible publically, you should also identify yourself by name.



## Nurses, midwives and students: unlawful or unprofessional social media behaviour

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) advice on social networking within the medical profession for nurses, midwives and students acknowledges the benefits such platforms can have. These include building and maintaining professional relationships, establishing or accessing professional networks or seeking advice from forums and accessing resources for professional development.

However, it does note that nurses and midwives, like doctors, could put their registration at risk if they act unlawful or unprofessional on social media, while students could jeopardise their ability to register.

## Such behaviour would include, but is not limited to:



Sharing confidential information inappropriately



Posting pictures of patients and people receiving care without their consent



Posting inappropriate comments about patients



Bullying, intimidating or exploiting people



Building or pursuing relationships with patients or service users



Stealing personal information or using someone else's identity



Encouraging violence or self-harm



Inciting hatred or discrimination

## Sources

[http://www.nhsemployers.org/~media/Employers/Publications/NHS\\_Social\\_Media\\_Toolkit\\_%20Introduction\\_and\\_Process.pdf](http://www.nhsemployers.org/~media/Employers/Publications/NHS_Social_Media_Toolkit_%20Introduction_and_Process.pdf)

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/standards/guidance/social-media-guidance/>

[http://www.gmc-uk.org/Doctors\\_\\_use\\_of\\_social\\_media.pdf\\_51448306.pdf](http://www.gmc-uk.org/Doctors__use_of_social_media.pdf_51448306.pdf)

<http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/a-social-media-toolkit-for-the-nhs>

Virtual College has created '**Managing your professional digital profile**', an online course that uses scenarios to provide social media guidance to professionals.

Visit **[www.healthcareea.co.uk/social\\_media\\_guidance\\_online\\_course](http://www.healthcareea.co.uk/social_media_guidance_online_course)** for more information.

[www.healthcareea.co.uk](http://www.healthcareea.co.uk)

info@healthcareea.co.uk • 01943 885086

**Health & Social Care Division, Virtual College Ltd**

Marsel House, Stephenson's Way, Ilkley, West Yorkshire, LS29 8DD, England

Virtual College is one of the UK's leading providers of online learning solutions with over **2 million online learners**. Together, we steer our online community by creating effective products, resources and services that meet the needs of organisations and individual learners.

