

Using social media as a medical professional



Summary

This guidance can help you to apply your professional judgement in key areas such as:

- considering the impact that content you share may have on patient behaviour and attitudes towards health, healthcare services, and other medical professionals
- being honest and trustworthy in online communications, and being open about any interests you have that may influence the recommendations that you make
- behaving professionally, maintaining boundaries and respecting patient confidentiality, privacy and dignity when using social media

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Professional standards: more detailed guidance

This guidance was published on 4 December 2023.

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You can find the latest version of all our professional standards at www.gmc-uk.org/guidance.

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1. *Good medical practice* sets out the principles, values, and standards of care and professional behaviour expected of all medical professionals registered with us. The standards of good practice apply to doctors, physician associates and anaesthesia associates (collectively referred to as medical professionals and whom we address directly as ‘you’ throughout the guidance). As with all our professional standards, this guidance applies to all our registrants to the extent it is relevant to the individual’s practice. *Using social media as a medical professional* builds on *Good medical practice* to provide more detail on our expectations of medical professionals in this area.
 2. The professional standards describe good practice, and not every departure from them will be considered serious. You must use your professional judgement to apply the standards to your day-to-day practice. If you do this, act in good faith and in the interests of patients, you will be able to explain and justify your decisions and actions. We say more about professional judgement, and how the professional standards relate to our fitness to practise processes, appraisal and revalidation, at the beginning of *Good medical practice*.

What we mean by social media

3. In this guidance the term ‘social media’ includes the use of private messaging, websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking.
4. The standards expected of you as a medical professional do not change because you are communicating through social media, rather than face to face or through other methods of communication. However social media is constantly evolving, as are societal norms and expectations.
5. This guidance is not intended to be a comprehensive statement of acceptable professional behaviour when using social media, but it can help you to apply your professional judgement in some key areas. You should read this guidance alongside *Good medical practice*, and the more detailed guidance that supports it. We also give further help and advice on our social media hub pages.
6. As well as our guidance, you must keep up to date with and follow social media policies relevant to your employment, manufacturer or developer usage policies, and the law.

Maintaining public trust

7. How you behave when using social media matters. Medical professionals, like everyone else, have rights to freedom of belief, privacy, and expression. But exercising these rights when

using social media as a medical professional has to be balanced with the possible impact on other people's rights and interests.

8. It is important that your content includes appropriate context, so that people who access what you say about health and healthcare have information that supports their understanding and helps them to verify your claims and expertise. If you're commenting on health or healthcare issues you should usually say who you are.
9. Bear in mind that content uploaded anonymously can, in many cases, be traced back to its point of origin. When communicating privately, including using instant messaging services, messages or other communications in private groups may also become public. We have a legal duty to investigate any concerns raised to us that reach our fitness to practise threshold.

Being honest and trustworthy in your communications

10. As a medical professional, patients and the public are likely to take what you say on trust, and they may adapt their attitudes or behaviour towards their health, other medical professionals, or healthcare services as a result.
11. You must take reasonable steps to make sure that the information you communicate on social media as a medical professional is not false or misleading and does not exploit people's vulnerability or lack of medical knowledge. You must not misrepresent your experience and qualifications.
12. If you use social media to advertise your services, or use your professional position to promote or endorse any other services or products, you must be open and honest about any interests you have that may influence (or could be seen to influence) the recommendations you make. You must also comply with relevant law, guidance and regulatory codes including those from the Committee of Advertising Practice, the Advertising Standards Authority and the Competition and Markets Authority.
13. Where relevant you must also follow the more detailed guidance we publish. In particular:
 - a. *Identifying and managing conflicts of interest*
 - b. *Cosmetic interventions*
 - c. *Good practice in proposing, prescribing, providing and managing medicines and devices.*

Behaving professionally and maintaining boundaries

14. You must not use social media to abuse, discriminate against, bully, harass or deliberately target any individual or group.
15. When interacting with or commenting about individuals or organisations on or using social

media, be aware that communications are subject to the same laws of copyright, defamation, discrimination, and harassment as written or verbal communications – whether they are made in a personal or professional capacity.

16. Using social media creates risks where social and professional boundaries become unclear. You must follow the guidance in *Maintaining personal and professional boundaries*.
17. If a patient contacts you about their care through your private profile, you should direct them to an appropriate healthcare setting for further support with their query.

Respecting patient confidentiality, privacy and dignity

18. When using social media of any kind, you must maintain patient confidentiality and recognise and respect patients' dignity and their right to privacy.
19. Although individual pieces of information may not breach confidentiality on their own, the sum of information shared could be enough for a patient or someone close to them to recognise and identify their case.
20. You must not disclose identifiable information about patients, when using social media, unless you have explicit consent to do so – for example, for educational purposes. In which case, you must follow our guidance: [Confidentiality: disclosing for education and training purposes](#) and [Making and using visual and audio recordings of patients](#).

Annex – Extracts from *Good medical practice*

Domain 4: Trust and professionalism

Introduction

Patients must be able to trust you with their lives and health, and medical professionals must be able to trust each other.

Good medical professionals uphold high personal and professional standards of conduct. They are honest and trustworthy, act with integrity, maintain professional boundaries and do not let their personal interests affect their professional judgements or actions.

Acting with honesty and integrity

81 You must make sure that your conduct justifies patients' trust in you and the public's trust in your profession.

82 You must always be honest about your experience, qualifications, and current role. You must introduce yourself to patients and explain your role in their care.

[...]

Communicating as a medical professional

All professional communication

88 You must be honest and trustworthy, and maintain patient confidentiality in all your professional written, verbal and digital communications.

89 You must make sure any information you communicate as a medical professional is accurate, not false or misleading. This means:

- a. you must take reasonable steps to check the information is accurate
- b. you must not deliberately leave out relevant information
- c. you must not minimise or trivialise risks of harm
- d. you must not present opinion as established fact.

Public professional communication, including using social media, advertising, promotion, and endorsement

90 When communicating publicly as a medical professional – including using social media, advertising your services, and promoting or endorsing any services or products:

- a. you must follow the guidance in **paragraph 88 and 89**
- b. you must declare any conflicts of interest
- c. you must not exploit people's vulnerability or lack of medical knowledge
- d. you must make sure what you communicate is in line with your duty to promote and protect the health of patients and the public.

91 You must follow our more detailed guidance on [*Using social media as a medical professional*](#).

[...]

Private communication

93 When communicating privately, including using instant messaging services, you should bear in mind that messages or other communications in private groups may become public.

Responding to safety risks

75 You must act promptly if you think that patient safety or dignity is, or may be, seriously compromised.

- c. If you have concerns that a colleague may not be fit to practise and may be putting patients at risk, you must ask for advice from a colleague, your defence body, or us. If you are still concerned, you must report this, in line with your workplace policy and our more detailed guidance on [*Raising and acting on concerns about patient safety*](#).

Email: gmc@gmc-uk.org

Website: gmc-uk.org

Telephone: **0161 923 6602**

General Medical Council, 3 Hardman Street, Manchester M3 3AW

Textphone: **please dial the prefix 18001** then
0161 923 6602 to use the Text Relay service.

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I ofyn am y cyhoeddiad hwn mewn fformat neu iaith arall, ffoniwch ni ar **0161 923 6602** neu e-bostiwch ni ar gmc@gmc-uk.org.

You are welcome to contact us in Welsh. We will respond in Welsh, without this causing additional delay.

Mae croeso i chi gysylltu â ni yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ymateb yn Gymraeg, heb i hyn achosi oedi ychwanegol.

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