

Social media guidance for health professionals



Social media offers huge benefits to doctors and health professionals, such as the opportunity to promote good practice and accurate health information to the public, as well as the ability to have discussions and debates with peers and colleagues.

The standards expected of doctors and health professionals remain the same and do not change because they are communicating through social media, rather than face to face or through other traditional media. Social media, however, does create new circumstances in which the established principles apply. Here is some guidance to using social media in a professional capacity.

The benefits versus the risks of social media:

Benefits	Risks
Growing your professional network	Personal privacy
Engaging with peers, colleagues, decision-makers and the public on important issues	Potential breaches of patient confidentiality
Facilitating access to accurate public health information	Tweets or posts being seen and reported by the media or to your employer
Improving access to services for patients	Your online behaviour may be viewed as inappropriate and unprofessional by others

When used well, the benefits of social media far outweigh the risks. Overleaf are some **Do's and Don'ts** to be mindful of.

Do:

- Keep yourself safe by ensuring your privacy settings on social media are as robust as possible. However, this does not mean that you are not at risk. Even if you later delete a tweet or post, it remains traceable. Also, people can easily screenshot posts and share as an image.
- Remember that if you identify yourself as a doctor, you must use your full name under GMC guidelines.
- Be conscious of the image you're presenting online. You must remain professional at all times.
- Get involved in discussions and debates but don't use inappropriate language or get involved in spats. If a discussion becomes inflamed, walk away from it.
- Report the misconduct of other medical professionals if they are behaving unprofessionally to the appropriate parties, such as the GMC, their employer etc. You may also report inappropriate behaviour of any user directly to the social media platform if you feel they are trolling, or it's abusive or harmful. However, do not use social media to whistle-blow; use the appropriate channels.
- Treat any complaints regarding social media usage in the same way as you would deal with any other complaint.

Don't:

- Say anything online that you wouldn't be happy to see printed in a newspaper. Use this as a general rule.
- Accept friend requests on Facebook from patients. Rather, direct them to your business Page or Group.
- Establish inappropriate relationships online with colleagues, peers or patients.
- Break patient confidentiality on a social media platform, even in a private group. This includes posting any images that are classified as clinical records.
- Make defamatory comments about an individual or organisation as Defamation Law can apply to comments made online.

Develop a Social Media Policy to ensure that there are clear guidelines in place for using social media in a professional capacity.

Additional Resources

[Doctors' use of social media](#) – GMC

[Social media guidance for doctors](#) – BMA

Social media, ethics and professionalism – Available to download from the BMA website

Social media: Practical guidance and best practice – Available to download from the BMA website

[Guidance on using social media responsibly](#) – NMC