

Social Media and Healthcare: Balancing Professionalism and Law

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Before you submit, post or send anything using social media, make sure you consider some of these points to help you manage what you put out on the internet.



As we all know, social media can present challenges for anyone engaging online, let alone if you are a patient-facing healthcare practitioner. You have an obligation to maintain ethical and regulatory responsibilities under the National Law when interacting online, just as you do when interacting in person. Picture yourself standing in the middle of the hospital or the medical or dental practice where you work and airing a contentious viewpoint. You just wouldn't do it...this also applies online.

The Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA), together with the 15 National Boards that regulate registered healthcare practitioners has a [social media policy](#) to help you understand your obligations when using social media.

The Do's of social media

Maintain professional obligations

Healthcare practitioners must remember to comply with the [Health Practitioner National Law Act 2009](#) ("the National Law") and the regulations of their National Board.

A healthcare practitioner must observe their professional obligations whether their online activity can be viewed by the public or is limited to a specific group of people (including a closed, 'invisible' group).

Comply with confidentiality and privacy obligations

Respecting the privacy and confidentiality of a patient remains paramount in an online setting. Accordingly, health practitioners should not use social media to discuss patients or post pictures of procedures, case studies, patients, or sensitive material, which may enable patients to be identified without having obtained consent in appropriate situations.

Posting unauthorised information or photographs of patients in any medium is a breach of the patient's privacy and confidentiality, including on a personal social media site or a group even where the privacy settings are at their highest.

Present information in an unbiased, evidence-based context

According to [AHPRA's Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service](#), healthcare practitioners "cannot make misleading or unsubstantiated claims or claim unreasonable expectation of benefit".

Healthcare practitioners must present information in an unbiased, evidence-based context and check content sourced from elsewhere before publishing it because practitioners are responsible for what they publish, even if it was written by someone else.

Healthcare practitioners must also be wary of creating an unreasonable expectation of beneficial treatment or encouraging the unnecessary use of a health service. Therefore, healthcare practitioners should avoid use of words like "cure", "safe", "effective" or "can help/improve/treat" as these words can potentially constitute false or misleading statements.

The Don'ts of Social Media

When using social media, healthcare practitioners should NOT:

Use testimonials about the service or business

Healthcare practitioners must remember that the National Law and the [Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service](#) ("the advertising guidelines") apply.

Healthcare practitioners are prohibited from using patient testimonials on a site or in social media that advertises a regulated health service. 'Testimonials' is defined very broadly to include statements, reviews, feedback about a service received and involves recommendations or positive statements about clinical aspects of a health service.

Healthcare practitioners are responsible for removing testimonials published on a website or in social media over which they have control (for example, patients posting comments about a practitioner on the practitioner's business website or social media account). However, healthcare practitioners are not responsible for removing unsolicited testimonials published on a website or on social media over which they do NOT have control (for example, Google reviews).

Post information that could harm or damage their professional reputation

Healthcare practitioners must be mindful that information and photographs circulated on social media may end up in the public domain, and may remain there indefinitely, irrespective of the intent at the time of posting.

Therefore, in addition to maintaining their professional obligations in accordance with the National Law and the Code of Conduct, healthcare practitioners should be mindful to ensure that their social media posts reflect their practice and professional reputation in a positive way.

Cross professional boundaries

Healthcare practitioners should be aware that they must continue to maintain professional boundaries with patients in an online setting. For this reason, healthcare practitioners should avoid adding their patients as friends on their personal social media accounts and should not use social media to socially communicate with patients or to discuss their medical conditions or treatments.

If a patient shows an interest in keeping up to date with a healthcare practitioner's practice, healthcare practitioners should encourage patients to 'like' or 'follow' a business page (if available) and keep communications strictly professional.

Implications for healthcare practitioners

While social media allows people to communicate and interact on an informal basis, healthcare practitioners must ensure that their online presence reflects the high standard of professionalism expected by the community and medical peers. What a healthcare practitioner does online can have real world consequences.

Inappropriate online behaviour can potentially damage a healthcare practitioner's personal integrity, the practitioner/patient relationship and a practitioner's relationships with colleagues, as well as future employment opportunities.

Any queries, [contact MIPS](#)

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