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School of Medicine: Social Media Guidance for Medical Students

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09 July 2019

Version	Updated:	By:
1.3	16 June 2023	GRH



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Contents

Introduction	3
Social media use for medical students	3
Implications of inappropriate use of social media	3
Social media principles for medical students.....	4
Further information	5



Introduction

The use of social media via the internet is widespread and has received a very large following amongst students. Such internet media includes commercial sites such as Facebook, X (Twitter) and YouTube but also extends to writing and contributing to blogs, message forums and e-mail lists.

Individual students may access such media through web-based computers (for example via a university or NHS network) or use mobile technology, such as a smartphone or tablet.

Social media use for medical students

Social media can be extremely useful for students on a medical course. From the ability to get a quick message to a group that a teaching session has been rescheduled, to contributing to an online discussion on an ethical problem, many students are finding that the social media network is playing an increasing role in how they work.

Many professional organisations, such as the GMC widely use social media, and there are many online medical communities available. [Doctors.Net](#) is an example and contains interactive forums and areas for professional communication.

Implications of inappropriate use of social media

Students who use social media need to take care in their use, even when it is felt that postings are 'locked down' by privacy settings, it is still possible for someone else to forward a contribution that was never intended for wider viewing. Millions of people can then see it.

If a student inappropriately uses social media, it immediately raises concerns about their suitability to become a doctor. It could then become a reason for a fitness to practise investigation and in serious cases might lead to termination of a course.

As aspiring health professionals, medical students have responsibilities and expected standards of behaviour which are more stringent than those that apply to students who are not seeking registration with a professional body such as the GMC. All healthcare students, as part of professionalism have a core responsibility to 'sustain the public's trust in the medical profession'. Guidance published jointly by the GMC and Medical Schools Council (MSC) reminds medical students that because they 'have certain privileges and responsibilities different from those of other students...different standards of professional behaviour are expected of them.'

The way you act online can potentially jeopardise your ability to join the GMC medical register. The GMC publishes [guidance on professional practice](#) that should always be followed.

There is also a [GMC publication](#) that discusses medical students' professional values and fitness to practise.

E-mail

E-mail is subject to the same rules as those which apply to written communication. Students should make use of appropriate etiquette when compiling e-mail messages. Care must be taken to ensure material is not illegal, defamatory, libellous, offensive, obscene, threatening or otherwise likely to cause nuisance, harm or distress to the recipient. Inappropriate use of



email may raise concerns about a person's suitability to become a doctor. Remember emails are vulnerable to redistribution. Do not assume the original intended recipient will be the only recipient.

Social media principles for medical students

All medical students should read and apply the following principles and directions in their use of social media. These have been adapted from guidance published by the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

- Do not use social networks to build or pursue relationships with patients and their families, even if they are no longer in your immediate contact. If you receive a friendship request from a current or former patient, Facebook allows you to ignore this request without the person being informed, avoiding the need to give unnecessary offence.
- Never post pictures of patients or service users, even if they ask you to do this. NHS staff members are issued with strict guidance on taking photographs of any person, or their family. As a medical student you are also obliged to work to the standards specified by the NHS organisation in which you are placed. If your mobile phone has a camera, you should never use it in a healthcare workplace.
- Patient confidentiality is paramount, and no images or text should ever be posted which may directly or indirectly identify a patient.
- No images or text should be posted which may cause colleagues, an individual patient, a patient's relative or patient group distress.
- No images or text should be posted which may cause concern from colleagues, peers, teachers, health professionals or institutions involved in the education of medical undergraduates. If you are in any doubt, then please consult one of the co-directors of Professionalism.
- You should be especially cautious about discussing issues relating to any experiences in a health care setting online, including conversations about patients or comments about colleagues. You should be aware that, even when anonymised, these comments may cause offence or be considered inappropriate
- You should not post university documents (e.g., handouts, course guides, logbooks, and minutes of meetings) on a blog or other social media without permission from one of the co-directors of Professionalism. There are established pathways for providing such information to those outside the University.
- Keep your personal and professional life separate as far as possible. For example, you could keep Facebook just for close friends and family but use Twitter for sharing information with people you may not know.
- If you identify yourself as a medical student in public online social media, such as Facebook, you should act responsibly at all times and uphold the reputation of your chosen profession and that of the University. Even if you do not identify yourself as a



medical student be aware that your conduct online could still jeopardise your future GMC registration if it calls your fitness to practise into question.

- Protect your own privacy. Think through what kinds of information you want to share and with whom and adjust your privacy settings. On Facebook, you can adjust your privacy settings at group level to share different levels of information with different kinds of friends. Remember that the more your personal life is exposed through social networking sites, the more likely it is that this could have a negative impact.
- Social networking sites should not be used for raising and escalating concerns (commonly referred to as whistle-blowing). The Medical School has a published policy and procedure in relation to whistle-blowing and a separate procedure for raising concerns.
- Remember that everything you post online is public, even with the strictest privacy settings. Once something is online, it can be copied and redistributed, and it is easy to lose control of it. Presume that everything you post online will be permanent and will be shared.

You can take action if you find yourself the target of complaints or abuse on social networking sites. You can remove someone from your friend list and block them from interacting with you, and most sites will include mechanisms to report abusive activity and provide support for users who are subject to abuse by others. If you are concerned about someone else's behaviour online, you should initially discuss this with a member of staff in the Medical School, for example, your Tutor.

Further information

This policy should be read in conjunction with the [University's 'Student Social Media Policy'](#).

You should also consider reading [guidance published by the British Medical Association](#).

Lincoln Medical Students should also read the [University of Lincoln's policy on Social Media](#).

University Guidance on use of computing facilities

The University has [rules and guidance for the use of the computing facilities](#) and has penalties for infringement of the rules, which can lead to the University's disciplinary procedure being invoked.