
Background

Social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs etc.) have become popular ways of communicating and networking from both personal and professional perspectives. While social media can be a valuable resource for connecting with friends or promoting key nutrition messages, the lines between personal and professional can easily become blurred.¹

When using social media, dietitians must consider the risks related to confidentiality, boundaries and professional practice. Communication over the internet has the potential to be very far-reaching with potential for legal, academic and professional ramifications when inappropriate content is posted through social networking sites.

Definitions

Social Media - forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content , such as videos.²

Social Networking – the practice of expanding the number of one’s business and/or social contacts by making connections through individuals. ³ Examples of social networking sites include: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and MySpace.

Practice Direction

Confidentiality

1. Respect the client's right to privacy and confidentiality by not posting any information that would potentially identify the client or their medical history. The smallest details may be enough to identify a client by a close friend or family member.¹
2. Information posted on social networking sites is **not** considered private. Assume that all information will be publically accessible. If you would not post the information on the bulletin board at work, it should not be posted on the internet.
3. Privacy settings may provide a false sense of security. These settings can be compromised and although settings may control who views the initial post, dietitians must remain aware that there is potential for the information to be widely disseminated by others.¹

Professional Practice

1. Do not initiate personal online contact with clients¹
2. Maintain a clear separation between personal and professional online profiles.
3. Information/pictures posted on a dietitians social networking site(s) reflect on both the dietitian and the profession as a whole. Dietitians are expected to behave in a professional manner and refrain from any act derogatory to the profession.⁴
4. Report violations of the Code of Ethics to the appropriate regulatory body. This includes information viewed on social networking sites.
5. Be aware of and comply with any employer policies on social media.
6. Dietitians that identify themselves by title or professional designation on their personal profile must be mindful that this creates perceptions and professional expectations about what they post.¹
7. Do not post disparaging, demeaning or embarrassing information about any of your professional contacts, including but not limited to: clients, colleagues, supervisors, employers, educators, professors, mentors, students or a regulatory body.^{1,5}

AND ALWAYS...PAUSE BEFORE YOU POST.

References:

1. Physiotherapy Alberta College and Association. *Practice Guideline: Use of Social Media*. November 2012.
2. Merriam-Webster dictionary. Retrieved from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media>
3. <http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/social-networking>. Accessed June 21, 2012
4. College of Dietitians of Manitoba. *Code of Ethics for Registered Dietitians*. Winnipeg: 2005
5. College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Social Media Practice Guidelines*. 2013