

The pros and cons of social media – and how to avoid the #pitfalls

While social media platforms can be a useful tool in communicating with patients and colleagues alike, doctors need to be aware of their professional and ethical obligations in this area, writes **Dee Duffy**

OVER THE YEARS doctors have used the mainstream media to communicate with the public on important medical issues. In more recent times, the use of social media has given doctors an additional and novel way to communicate with the public as trusted sources of information.

Doctors can use social media platforms to raise awareness about new and emerging health concerns or to encourage healthy lifestyles. Doctors using social media can also benefit from professional networks, upcoming events and health and policy discussions in a specialist field. It can facilitate information-sharing across country boundaries, stretching the reach of global health information at a doctor's fingertips. It can also be a useful way to share practice information with patients, such as opening hours, available services etc. Similarly in the context of public health, the use of social media can be particularly useful to doctors.

Of course, doctors can use social media for personal interactions with friends and family, but it is important to remember that its use is not without its pitfalls. Some doctors have found themselves subject to local complaints to their practice or to the Medical Council due to online posts. We have set out below some factors to consider so as to avoid any pitfalls when using social media.

Medical Council guidance

The most recent version of the Medical Council's *Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners* (2024)¹ (the 'Guide') sets out more detailed guidelines on social media use than previous versions of the Guide.

At paragraph 49 entitled 'Communicating with the public', the Guide acknowledges that traditional media, speaking engagements, social media, digital media and other public-facing platforms to communicate can bring significant benefits to patients, the public and colleagues, but may also pose risks as well as professional and ethical challenges. It goes on to say that patients and the public should be able to trust what a doctor says in the media or online and that doctors should consider the possible impact on patients and the public's perception of the profession before making comments publicly, via media, online or in-person.

Online communications

The Guide states that if a doctor gives clinical advice online, they should always identify themselves by name. It states that doctors are legally liable for anything

published on their own social channels and should take this into consideration when posting content or advice publicly.

At times the public is exposed to inaccurate information and therefore it is important that they can confirm the source of the information they may rely on. All reasonable steps should be taken to ensure all information is accurate, valid and verifiable. No unsustainable claims for effectiveness of treatments should be made and, obviously, patients' vulnerabilities or lack of medical knowledge should not be exploited.

The Guide states that in respect of the impact of a doctor's conduct on colleagues and the need to behave respectfully, that the same standards apply to all interactions, including social media and networking sites.

Maintaining private and professional boundaries

The Guide warns that researching and following personal behaviours of patients online or on social media platforms may threaten the trust needed for a strong patient-doctor relationship and should not be undertaken. It defines social media platforms as including, but not limited to: social networking sites, professional networking sites and video sharing networks, video hosting platforms, discussion forums, review sites, shared blogging platforms and interest-based networks.

It is best to keep personal and professional social media use separate and this is stated in the Guide. In some cases, it can cause social and professional boundaries to become unclear. The Guide states that doctors should, as far as possible, avoid communicating with patients through social networking sites and that such sites cannot guarantee confidentiality, regardless of privacy settings. It is important to consider that interacting with patients' personal social media platforms could blur professional boundaries and could cloud judgment and clinical decision-making.

The Guide states that it is a matter for doctors to choose whether to use social media in their private life. It goes on to say that while settings on many platforms allow information to be shared only with a closed group of friends or family, this privacy cannot be guaranteed. It says that before posting, doctors should consider how information or images they post might be viewed by patients or the public, if they were to become more widely available.

The Guide refers to closed professional networks as a useful way to share experiences and case studies, to set up expert or learning groups, and get advice or help.

The Guide also states that doctors should take reasonable

steps to check that any network they are using has effective security settings and privacy policies. We would recommend taking time to review settings on social media platforms and regularly change passwords to ensure there is no risk of unauthorised access to your accounts. It is important to be aware that even with the proper privacy settings in place, anything posted online may end up being ‘shared’ and distributed further than intended.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is fundamental to the trust between a doctor and their patient and a core element of the doctor/patient relationship. It is vital that doctors never share anything on social media that could breach patient confidentiality or identify a patient. The mere fact that a person is a doctor’s patient is confidential and to acknowledge such a fact without consent to do so would breach patient confidentiality.

The Guide specifically states that doctors must not publish information or comments about, or images of, individual patients from which those patients might be identified or identifiable on publicly available platforms.

Anonymising individual patient information may not be sufficient as when combined with other pieces of information, a patient could inadvertently be identifiable to themselves or others. Sometimes doctors share anecdotal or hypothetical situations on social media and when doing so, it is important to ensure that no patient could assume that the situation relates to them.

The obligations on doctors can be frustrating when a patient posts on social media websites and may leave a negative online review or comments about a doctor, with some facts that are untrue or may require clarification. Unfortunately, when faced with such an issue, it is impossible to give the doctor’s side of the story without breaching patient confidentiality and any such public comment or retaliatory post should be avoided.

Tips for social media use

As a doctor, the reality is you are never really off duty. You are subject to professional and ethical obligations and your status in the public eye demands a high standard of conduct at all times.

We recommend that you bear the following in mind when using social media:

- Keep personal and professional use of social media separate
- Consider whether anything you post could reflect badly on the profession
- Make it clear that all views expressed are your own
- Avoid communicating with patients through social media sites
- Never publish information about patients or anything that could cause a patient to identify themselves or to be identified by others
- Check all privacy settings when using social media sites
- Ensure practice staff are subject to social media policies and adhere to confidentiality obligations at all times
- Ensure any information you post is accurate, valid and up-to-date
- If you disagree with other posters on social media, always try to remain respectful and professional
- If you become subject to abusive messages or posts/harassment, try to ignore them, unfollow/block the user and report the abuse in accordance with the platform’s relevant policies. You should also contact your indemnifier for assistance and advice in such situations.

Conclusion

Overall, it is vital to remember that the standard expected of doctors is no different when communicating on social media than when communicating face to face or through traditional media. The content you post not only directly reflects your professionalism, but also has the ability to influence public opinion of the medical profession.

While social media provides new and innovative ways of communicating with patients and colleagues and creates opportunities for clinical learning and the sharing of experiences when used prudently and appropriately, unfortunately it can also have disadvantages when used unwisely, such as inadvertent breaches of patient confidentiality. It is essential therefore for doctors to familiarise themselves with their professional and ethical obligations and the guidance in this area to avoid the pitfalls associated with social media use.

Dee Duffy, Senior Legal Counsel, Medisec

Reference
 1. Medical Council. Guide to Professional Conduct & Ethics for Registered Medical Practitioners 9th Edition, 2024. www.medicalcouncil.ie



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