

Use of Social Media

Introduction

Social media and online forums (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, blogs etc.) are common methods for individuals to network and communicate, including the sharing of health information. While the College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba (CPM) recognizes that social media provides valuable tools for communicating, professional development, personal and professional business purposes, social media can also blur the lines and potentially cross the boundary from professional to personal relationships.

The appropriate use of social media requires ethical and professional considerations for all health care providers; it is important that physiotherapists as well as student physiotherapists uphold their professional integrity and obligations while communicating regardless of the social media platform.

Purpose

This document provides guidance to registrants of CPM about the importance of relevant legal and professional obligations while engaging in social media. This document is not a policy *per se*, nor does it establish any new expectations for physiotherapists or student physiotherapists. Rather, this document clarifies how existing professional expectations can be met in the social media domain.

College position on social media

The College's position is that physiotherapists and student physiotherapists are expected to comply with all of their existing professional expectations, including those set out in relevant legislation, the Code of Ethics, and College position statements/practice standards and policies, when engaging in the use of social media platforms and technologies.

Relevant professional expectations

Legal and professional expectations that govern physiotherapy practice are set out in the College's Reference Guide, policies, and relevant legislation. A number of these obligations are relevant to the use of social media by registrants, and are articulated below. These obligations are not unique to social media, as they apply to physiotherapy practice universally.

Expectations of particular relevance include:

- Compliance with all legal and professional obligations to maintain patient privacy and confidentiality.³
- Maintenance of appropriate professional boundaries with patients and those close to them.⁴
- Maintenance of professional and respectful relationships with patients, colleagues, and other members of the health-care team.⁵
- Compliance with relevant legislation and policies with respect to advertising.⁶
- Compliance with the law related to defamation, copyright, and plagiarism when posting content online.⁷
- Avoidance of any perceived conflict of interest.⁸

Guidelines

In order to satisfy the above professional expectations while engaging in social media, it is recommended that physiotherapists:

1. Assume that all content on the Internet is public and accessible to all. On-line activity creates a digital record that remains *forever* and can be accessed by millions of people including professional contacts, colleagues, clients/patients, and employers^{1,2}.
2. Do not post information on-line that relates to an actual client/patient. Ensure compliance with legal and professional obligations to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Bear in mind that an unnamed client/patient may still be identified through a range of other information, such as a description of their clinical condition, or area of residence.
3. Refrain from providing clinical advice to specific clients/patients through social media*.
4. It is acceptable, however, to use social media to disseminate generic medical or health information for educational or information sharing purposes.
5. Protect their own reputation, the reputation of the profession, and the public trust by not posting content that could be viewed as unprofessional.
6. Be mindful of their internet presence and be proactive in removing content posted by self or others which may be viewed as unprofessional. When an individual self-identifies as a physiotherapist, he/she is using title and may be subject to the Standards of the College, even on personal accounts. Physiotherapists are advised to monitor business and personal

* Clinical advice is defined as advice of a clinical nature that is directed toward a specific individual to address a medical concern. It is distinct from general health information that is not patient-specific, but disseminated to a general audience for education or information sharing purposes.

posts on a regular basis; and ensure that reviews or comments on business posts/pages have been disabled in order to prevent the posting of testimonials.

7. Refrain from establishing personal connections with clients/patients or persons closely associated with them on-line, as this may hinder physiotherapists from maintaining appropriate professional boundaries and may compromise physiotherapists' objectivity^{4,5}. It is acceptable to create an online connection with clients/patients for professional purposes only.
8. Refrain from seeking out client/patient information that may be available on-line without prior consent. Individuals are entitled to a reasonable expectation of privacy. While physiotherapists are expected to adhere to all of their relevant legal obligations under PHIA with respect to the collection of personal health information, they should also refrain from seeking out other types of non-protected information on-line without prior consent.
9. Read, understand, and apply the strictest privacy settings necessary to maintain control over access to the physiotherapist's own personal information. Be consistent with the *Personal Health Information Act* and security best practices.
10. Comply with relevant employer policies specific to social media usage or general policies on computer and internet usage. "Revelation of character" may be a factor in rightful dismissal. Consider if the on-line post may damage or be perceived to damage the reputation of the employer or if the behaviour is inconsistent with the values or goals of the employer.
11. Recognize that social media platforms are constantly evolving and be proactive in considering how professional expectations apply in any given set of circumstances.

AND ALWAYS.....PAUSE BEFORE YOU POST

References

1. Physiotherapy Alberta (2012). *Practice Guideline: Use of Social Media*. Retrieved August 17, 2016 from https://www.physiotherapyalberta.ca/files/practice_guideline_social_media.pdf
2. Canadian Physiotherapy Association (2013). *Canadian Physiotherapists and Social Media: Issues and guidelines for use*. Retrieved August 17, 2016 from <https://www.physiotherapy.ca/social-media-guidelines>
3. Government of Manitoba (2013). *The Personal Health Information Act (PHIA)*. Retrieved August 17, 2016 from <http://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/p033-5e.php>

4. College of Physical Therapists of British Columbia (2015) *Where's the Line? Professional Boundaries in a Therapeutic Relationship*. Retrieved August 17, 2016 from http://cptbc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CPTBC-Wheres-the-Line_2015.pdf
5. National Physiotherapy Advisory Group (2009). *Essential Competency Profile for Physiotherapists in Canada*. Available at <http://www.physiotherapyeducation.ca/Resources/Essential%20Comp%20PT%20Profile%202009.pdf> Collaborator (3.1) and Communicator (2.1) roles; according to CPM's Code of Ethics it is the duty of a physiotherapist to maintain professional and respectful relationships.
6. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba [Position Statement 4.14 Advertising](#).
7. For example, *Copyright Act*, R.S.C. 1985, c. C-42.
8. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba [Position Statement 5.1 Conflict of Interest](#).

Additional Resources:

American Physical Therapy Association (2012). *Standards of Conduct in the use of social media*. Available at www.apta.org

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Nova Scotia College of Physiotherapists (2016). *Social Media*. Retrieved August 17, 2016 from <http://nsphysio.com/resources/2016+02+27+Social+Media+Advisory.pdf>

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