



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

# SOCIAL MEDIA

# What you need to know



If you have any questions with regards to the information contained in this document or related to Social Media, please contact our Workplace Relations team on 9439 8822 or via [workplace@amansw.com.au](mailto:workplace@amansw.com.au)



Social media... most of us have it (and possibly use it far more than we care to admit), but you should also understand your professional obligations when using it.

## What is social media?

The definition of social media is constantly evolving, but it generally refers to internet-based tools that allow individuals and groups to communicate, to advertise or share opinions, information, ideas, messages, experiences, images, and video or audio clips. Some of the most common social media platforms include Facebook, Twitter, WeChat, Instagram, WhatsApp, Reddit and LinkedIn.

There are also medical sites that could be considered social media such as HealthEngine, Whitecoat and Podium.

## What does the Medical Board say about social media use?

As a doctor in Australia, you are required to comply with the Medical Board's Code of Conduct. The code applies in all settings and applies to how doctors use social media. The code requires that you:

- Ensure your use of social media is consistent with your ethical and legal obligations to protect patient confidentiality and privacy; and
- Behave professionally and courteously to colleagues and other practitioners when using social media.

The **Medical Board has issued Guidelines** help medical practitioners understand and meet their professional obligations when using social media. The Guidelines may be used by the Medical Board as evidence as to what constitutes appropriate professional conduct or practice. A failure to comply with the Guidelines may result in a complaint being made and investigated about a practitioner.

## Can something I post in a personal capacity, breach the Medical Board's guidelines?

Even though what you post on social media may not be directly related to your job as a doctor, the Medical Board may consider social media use in your personal capacity if it raises concerns about your fitness to hold registration.

When using social media be careful to:

- Maintain patient confidentiality and ensure comments or photos do not inadvertently disclose patient information. Take care when posting personal views about social and clinical issues that may impact on your patients.
- Maintain professionalism and professional boundaries.
- Ensure public health messages are in keeping with professional codes, standards and guidelines.
- Not to breach advertising obligations.

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## Does my employer have policies that I need to be aware of?

Yes.

As a doctor in training working in a NSW hospital, the **NSW Health Code of Conduct** can apply in relation to posts made outside of work hours. The Code applies to comments about other staff, patients, patients' family members or visitors on social media where your status as a NSW Health staff member is indicated or can be inferred.

You should also be aware of the NSW Health Policy Directive, **Public Communication (PD2017\_012)**.

Any personal comments made on social media must not be seen to represent the views of any NSW Health organisation.

Staff must not, in their capacity as NSW Health employees, make any comment on social media without prior authorisation.

Staff must:

- Avoid conduct that could bring NSW Health or any of its staff, patients or clients into disrepute, including when using social media.
- Keep confidential all personal information and records, including not discussing or providing information on social media that could identify patients or divulge patient information.
- Not take an unfair advantage of, or exploit any relationship with, patients or clients in any way, including not engaging in on-line friendships with patients or clients via social media; staff may accept patients and clients as members of their professional pages that contain information relating to the professional practice of the staff member.

## Can I be disciplined by my employer for making comments on social media?

Yes, if you are found to have breached the Code of Conduct, cause damage to your employer or another employee then disciplinary action may be taken.

## I have had a bad day at work and want to connect with my support network. Can I do so through social media?

No, do not post about colleagues or management on social media. By all means, please reach out to your support network but do not do so via social media.

Albeit inadvertently, what you post may be considered to be evidence of bullying or defamation and / or breach your professional obligations as an employee and a registered medical practitioner.

Even if you do not think you have identified your place of work or particular people, others may be able to identify persons and your place of work.

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## Should I make my account private?

Yes. Always opt for the highest privacy settings possible.

Check the privacy settings for all the social media platforms you use. Platforms like Facebook often give you the option to view your profile from the eyes of someone who isn't 'friends' with you. Take some time to look at this so you can clearly see what a stranger might see.

## I've posted something I now regret, can I delete it?

Your digital footprint can be very difficult to erase. Yes, you can delete it from your own profile, but that doesn't remove it if it has been shared by others or if the content has been archived by a search engine. In many cases (depending on the company's terms and conditions) your posts and comments become the property of the social media platform.

Keep in mind that once you have posted something, it may be impossible to remove the content afterwards. If in doubt, don't post.

## I want to post something about a person/situation and I'm sure it can't be identified by anyone else. Surely that's ok?

If you are considering posting de-identified information, you should carefully consider whether it can be sufficiently de-identified.

You may not intentionally post confidential information, however there may be identifiable information in the background of a photo or video you post. Think twice before taking photos or videos in the workplace as you may unknowingly breach your privacy and/or confidentiality obligations. It is probably best not to post at all.

## Should I allow patients to follow or 'friend' me?

No, you shouldn't allow patients to 'friend' or follow you on your personal accounts. To do so places you in a position where professional boundaries may be breached.

When accepting friend or follow requests, always ensure you know person who is adding you. Don't accept requests from patients, and don't seek to add patients either. Think about not using your full name so that it is harder for patients to find you on your social platforms. Make sure that your privacy settings allow you to 'approve' follow or friend requests before people have access to your profile.

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## I just started a new term rotation and my medical group here uses WhatsApp to communicate about patients. Is this allowed?

If you do need to communicate with a colleague about a patient, check if there is a platform endorsed by your hospital/employer.

## Should I use my own phone to take a clinical image?

Before using your own phone to take a clinical image or sharing any image online, familiarise yourself with your organisation's policy on clinical images and social media.

Before taking an image consider the purpose for taking it and obtain patient consent. Document the consent process in the medical record.

Do not sent the clinical image to anyone without the patient's express consent to do so or if the patient would reasonably expect you to do so as a part of their clinical management.

Do not upload clinical images on to any social media networks, and make sure you delete all images once saved to the medical record.

## Is it okay to tag colleagues in posts on social media?

Always be courteous when communicating with colleagues over social media. When sharing social media posts with colleagues or 'tagging' them to draw their attention to it, be mindful that they may not wish to be identified in such a way.

## Should I post anonymously?

If you are posting in your professional capacity as a doctor, try best to avoid posting anonymously and to use your own name. Clearly identifying yourself can lend credibility and accountability to online communications. It's also a good idea to state whether you are or are not representing your employer or hospital.

If you are posting personally, it's up to you, but if it's something that may impact on your professional integrity, it might be better to avoid posting it online in the first place.



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## Now I am a doctor in training should I look back over my social media history in light of my professional obligations?

Yes. Review old posts and 'liked' pages. Think about how these could reflect poorly on your professional reputation.

Remember those days when you would like a page that you thought was funny at the time? Chances are you might not think it's funny now. It's a good idea to review all liked pages and previous posts to ensure that nothing previously posted or 'liked' could be considered offensive.

## If you could provide me with one piece of advice about social media, what would it be?

Think twice before posting and commenting.

Before posting anything, stop and think about how what you are about to say may be reflected in a negative way. Could it upset or offend people? If you're not sure, sense check it with a colleague, or don't post it at all.

Be aware that any material posted online (even when posted anonymously) can be traced back to the original author.



## MORE INFORMATION

For more information on social media we recommend familiarising yourself with the following publications:

**A GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA & MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM:  
The tips and traps every doctor and medical student should know**  
Australian Medical Association Limited

**NSW Health code of conduct** NSW Health Policy Directive

**Social media: How to meet your obligations under the National Law**  
Medical Board of Australia

This information is for general guidance only and should not be used as a substitute for obtaining specific assistance or advice. The information included in this document was collated citing NSW Health Policy Directive PD2015\_049 – NSW Health Code of Conduct and guidelines provided by the Medical Board of Australia.



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