



Physical Therapists

Social Media

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Social media generally refers to internet-based tools that allow individuals and communities to network, collaborate, and share information, ideas, personal messages, images, and other content, and has both personal and professional uses. Most of us are familiar with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn; new platforms and applications appear all the time.

As licensed healthcare professionals, we must abide by the code of ethics and other regulatory requirements, and demonstrate an expected level of professional behaviour whether we are interacting in person or electronically. What you decide to post on your personal social media page is as important as what is on your professional page; patients and members of the public may go looking for—or inadvertently find—both personal and professional profiles.

While there are many benefits to using social media, there are also risks and challenges. It is important to remember that **when content is on social media, regulatory requirements** (for example, those related to ethical behavior, professional boundaries and communication, privacy, and marketing and advertising) **still apply**. Sometimes individuals say more, or with a different tone, than they would during an in-person interaction. Prior to posting, take a moment to reflect on whether or not you would make the same comments directly to the individual or in a public forum; if not, you should not say it on social media.

Sometimes social media posts can be misinterpreted or misunderstood by the reader. Be particularly careful to use appropriate language, which is not discriminatory, racist or culturally insensitive. Posting of political or personal beliefs could affect the therapeutic relationship or public perception of the health services you offer. In addition to misinterpretation, posts can potentially be modified by the reader to suit their purposes.

The reach enabled by social media platforms is often underestimated. Many social media users underestimate the size of audience a message or comment can reach, and the speed with which it can spread online. It is also important to consider the permanency of what you are posting; once you have hit the “send” button you should assume the information is permanent. It is common to see deleted comments or posts resurface at a later date.



Providing advice to patients online

Whilst (secure) email communication with patients can be useful for scheduling or other administrative functions, providing patient-specific information or advice via email or social media carries risks due to privacy concerns and the inability to know who is viewing the content. In addition, it is not possible to fully assess the patient and develop a treatment plan based on your findings over social media.

Marketing and advertising on social media

Complaints to the College related to advertising (usually on social media) are common. Regardless of the mode of advertising, regulatory requirements related to marketing and advertising apply. For example, the Standard of Marketing, Advertising and Promotions requires that any advertising or marketing (regardless of the medium used) must be accurate and honest. In addition, a licensee must refrain from marketing, advertising, or using advertisements that provide unsubstantiated claims or guarantees of successful results, make false, misleading, unsubstantiated, or disparaging claims of superiority over other healthcare providers, or offer patients incentives or other inducements for unnecessary or inappropriate health products or services.

Testimonials and web reviews

Soliciting testimonials or other web reviews (such as Google reviews) can be problematic. First, consider the power differential between you and your patient. If a patient is asked by a health professional to provide a testimonial or post a review, they may feel some sense of obligation or pressure to do so, or to provide a positive review that doesn't represent their actual experience. If they choose not to post, they might think their care will be negatively impacted. Second, requesting a testimonial or review might influence the professional boundaries between you and your patient. Would you feel a sense of extra obligation towards your patient if they provide a stellar review that could impact your ability to provide objective physical therapy services? Or conversely, might the therapeutic relationship be negatively affected if the patient refused to post a review or posted one that you didn't agree with?

Guidelines for social media use

1. Remember that maintaining privacy is a challenge. Routinely review the privacy statements, policies and settings of the platforms you use. Choose the strongest privacy settings available for personal social media activities.
2. Consider what to share. Generally, it is not advisable to share any patient information online, as it is very difficult to preserve privacy. This includes instances



where patients can be “indirectly” identified, such as an unusual case history or images of a specific part of the body or specific treatment. If you do post patient-related material, use extreme caution. As per the Practice Standard for Consent, you must have specific patient consent to share patient information, and this may include testimonials or images of your patients online. Consider that the consent obtained from the patient must include the potential risks and issues that can arise from content posted online.

3. Ensure any content related to specific techniques or services is evidence based.
4. Keep business and personal social media activity separate. Utilize different profiles and establish separate pages or accounts for professional or business social media activities. Avoid referring to your practice or health professional role on personal pages.
5. Pause before posting. Consider: Do you want this information online? Is there any identifiable patient information included? Does this contain any unprofessional wording or statements, or language which could be misinterpreted? Be cautious when commenting or providing opinion online, particularly in relation to topics that may influence your practice, or which could be perceived as discriminatory.
6. Accepting “friend” or “follow” requests from patients on personal social media accounts can blur the boundaries between a professional and personal relationship. Consider how accepting this request would change the dynamic in professional boundaries between a patient and health professional.
7. Be cautious of activities that could be seen as endorsing products or services by other providers (such as “liking” a product or service). This could lead to situations of perceived (or actual) conflict of interest, and/or have other unanticipated consequences.
8. Remember that you do not know who is viewing your social media posts. Be very careful if you post general health-related information, as you do not know who is viewing the content and how it may be interpreted or used. Do not give health advice to individual patients or members of the public on social media.

We encourage you to contact CHCPBC’s Practice Advisor team (practicesupport@chcpbc.org) if you have any questions related to social media use.

| *(With thanks to the College of Physiotherapists of Alberta for their June 2023 document “Social Media Guide for Physiotherapists”, and also to the CHCBC Dietitians and Psychologists practice resources, both of which were integral to the development of this document).*