

Social Media – Principles for Physiotherapists

Introduction:

This Social Media guideline reflects the College’s mandate to serve and protect the public by fostering excellence, accountability and ethical care through effective regulation, education and collaboration. The College is aware that the use of social media is increasing with 5.66 billion people or 68.7% of the world’s population using social media¹ and that platforms are constantly evolving impacting how people interact online. The College also recognizes that social media provides valuable tools for communicating, professional development, as well as to enhance personal and professional business. However, whether communication is online or in-person, physiotherapists must communicate respectfully, honestly and professionally.

Purpose:

This guide will review how anyone using title, including physiotherapists, physiotherapy students and physiotherapy Examination Candidates, can interact on social media professionally while meeting the expectations outlined in the Code of Ethics and the Practice Directions.

This document is not a policy *per se*, nor does it establish any new expectations for registrants using title as they interact with social media. Rather, this document clarifies how existing professional expectations can be met in the social media domain.

Definitions

Social Media: The term “social media” does not have one commonly accepted definition but is more broadly defined as it is constantly evolving. This term refers to the online technologies and practices that are used to gather and communicate, share ideas and content and for collaboration including in real-time. ^{2,3}

e-Professionalism: The way an individual engages online in relation to their profession, including their attitudes, actions and adherence to relevant professional code of conduct.⁴ Cain et al (2009)

define e-professionalism as attitudes and behaviors reflecting traditional professional paradigms that are manifested through digital media.⁵

College position on social media

The use of social media platforms while using professional title or identifying as a physiotherapist, student or Examination Candidate is a College matter because of the effect it can have on public perception of the profession, risks to the public and impacts on the public's perception and trust in the health system. It is important to remember that the responsibility is not only on those managing the social media account, but it is the responsibility of the physiotherapist to be aware of content produced that is associated with them or the profession and how this may impact a client or the general public. Negative effects can include the spread of misinformation, potential breach of privacy or loss of the public's trust.³

Relevant professional expectations

Legal and professional expectations that govern physiotherapy practice are set out in the College's Code of Ethics, Practice Directions, 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.

Practice Directions:

- 1) Advertising and Marketing⁶:** The physiotherapist engages in advertising, marketing and promotional activities in a manner that is truthful, accurate, and verifiable and does not engage in or allow advertising, marketing, and promotional activities that are deceptive or misleading. This includes, but is not limited to, the physiotherapist gaining explicit informed consent from patients before using their pictures, videos or images for the purpose of advertising or marketing.
- 2) Boundary Violations⁷:** The physiotherapist acts with integrity and maintains appropriate professional boundaries with clients, colleagues, students and others.
- 3) Communication⁸:** The physiotherapist communicates professionally, clearly, effectively, and in a timely manner to support and promote quality physiotherapy services. With respect to social media in particular, the physiotherapist must consider that they are communicating scientifically sound, evidence-based information and not provide client specific recommendations via social media platforms.
- 4) Documentation⁹:** Physiotherapists must maintain records that are accurate, legible and complete, written in a timely manner. If communication is occurring through social media, this communication must become part of the client record.
- 5) Evidence Informed Practice¹⁰:** The physiotherapist must share information related to evidence and best practices and not promote information, treatment options or products,

that are not grounded in scientific, peer- reviewed and/or physiologically plausible evidence.

- 6) Privacy and Record Retention¹¹:** The physiotherapist must protect the privacy of client information in all environments regardless of format. In addition, the physiotherapist must gain consent for disclosure of health information. Overall, the physiotherapist must maintain client privacy and confidentiality in compliance with the requirements of the privacy legislation relevant to their practice.

Code of Ethics¹²

Members of the physiotherapy profession have the ethical responsibility to:

- Maintain professional boundaries that honour and respect the therapeutic relationship with clients. (Accountability, Integrity)
- Communicate openly, honestly and respectfully with clients at all times. (Integrity, Respect)
- Respect the confidentiality, privacy, and security of client information in all forms of communication. (Accountability, Integrity)
- Use electronic communication and social media and other forms of digital technology professionally and respectfully, conforming to confidentiality guidelines. (Accountability, Integrity)
- Conduct and present themselves with integrity and professionalism. (Integrity)
- Commit to maintaining and enhancing the reputation and standing of the physiotherapy profession, and to inspiring public trust and confidence by treating everyone with dignity and respect in all interactions. (Excellence, Social Responsibility)

Privacy Legislation

Beyond the profession specific legislation and standards, a physiotherapist is also held to the privacy legislation related to their practice. The *Personal Health Information Act¹³* outlines these requirements that are similar to those discussed above related to the Practice Directions and Code of Ethics.

Under *PHIA* physiotherapists are required to:

- Collect only as much personal health information about an individual as is reasonably necessary to accomplish the purpose for which it is collected.
- Use personal health information only for the purpose for which it was collected or received, and shall not use it for any other purpose, unless the individual the personal health information is about has consented to the use.

- Protect personal health information by adopting reasonable administrative, technical and physical safeguards that ensure the confidentiality, security, accuracy and integrity of the information.
- Ensure that personal health information is destroyed in a manner that protects the privacy of the individual the information is about.

It is important to note that physiotherapists can be subject to several pieces of privacy legislation, however regardless of the specific legislation, personal health information about an identifiable individual (including contact information, health and treatment information, client photos or videos) is protected under legislation meaning the physiotherapist must be able to identify which privacy legislation is applicable and the context in which it is being used.

Posting a “deidentified” client post still may result in a breach of client privacy and relevant privacy legislation. The physiotherapist must be mindful that the information regarding the physiotherapist posting in addition to details of client characteristics and their condition can be sufficient to identify the subject of the post.

Sharing information protected under privacy legislation through social media or any other mechanism constitutes a breach of privacy legislation and could result in disciplinary or legal action.

Considerations for e-Professionalism³

- **Perceived Anonymity:** Posting online can provide a false sense of anonymity and safety. Reflect on a planned post and consider if this comment would be made in a face-to-face interaction. If not, this should not be posted on social media. Also consider that the use of a pseudonym does not make it any more suitable to post defamatory or objectionable content or to breach confidentiality or privacy.
- **Immediacy of Posting:** Consider that there are very few barriers within platforms that will cause someone to pause before they post. It is advisable to wait minutes, hours or even days when considering what to post or how to interact online.
- **Reach and Longevity:** It is important to consider the reach of what is posted. There are many examples of deleted comments or posts resurfacing at a later date where an image was captured before the post was deleted. Consider that what is being posted can be assumed to be both public and permanent.
- **Private versus Professional:** The College has been asked many times why posting on a personal page could impact a registrant’s professional practice and licensure. Clients and the public will access and use social media and the internet to look up physiotherapists providing their care. Posts made on a private account can be attributed to a physiotherapist’s professional self, even though they may have been made in off-work hours. Physiotherapists

are held to the Code of Ethics and expected to have an acceptable level of professionalism whether at work or not. A physiotherapist is regarded as a physiotherapist at all times.

General Guidelines

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

1. Ensure only generic medical or health information for educational or information sharing purposes is shared.
2. Protect their own reputation, the reputation of the profession, and the public trust by not posting content that could be viewed as unprofessional.
3. 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. It is acceptable to create an online connection with clients/patients for professional purposes only.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. Recognize that social media platforms are constantly evolving and be proactive in considering how professional expectations apply in any given set of circumstances.
8. Consider these important considerations²:
 - a. Aim: What is trying to be achieved?
 - b. Audience: Who is the information meant to reach?
 - c. Channel: What is the best platform to achieve the aim and reach the target audience?
 - d. Policy: Have a policy in place to promote consistency and professionalism in online posting.

AND ALWAYS.....PAUSE BEFORE POSTING¹⁴

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5. Cain J, Romanelli F. E-professionalism: a new paradigm for a digital age. *Curr Pharm Teaching Learning* 2009 Dec;1(2):66-70.
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7. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba Practice Direction: [Boundary Violations](#)
8. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba Practice Direction: [Communication](#)
9. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba Practice Direction: [Documentation](#)
10. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba Practice Direction: [Evidence-Informed Practice](#)
11. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba Practice Direction: [Privacy and Record Retention](#)

12. College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba: [Code of Ethics](#)

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Additional Resources:

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