Guidance for Scottish Allied Health Professionals about their Use of Social Media

Introduction

The popularity of social media has grown rapidly in recent years. There is widespread use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter amongst student and qualified Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) and there are a growing number of well-established blogs and internet forums that are aimed specifically at clinical professionals, such as doctors.net.uk, the BMJ’s doc2doc and emerging AHP resources.

The AHP Directors Scotland Group (ADSG) has recently undertaken a project to explore the potential value of using social media (twitter and blogs) to raise awareness and profile of AHPs. This project (project Gandhi) has emphasised the very exciting opportunities that these media have to offer. Examples of being able to showcase AHP value and contribution to patient care as well as engaging with a widespread international audience have emerged. The overall recommendations of this work have been that AHPs in Scotland should be encouraged to embrace these technologies and use them to develop new networks and convey information about their value. Although AHPs should be free to take advantage of the many personal and professional benefits that social media can offer, it is important however that they are also aware of the potential risks involved.

While many AHPs in Scotland use social media without encountering any difficulties, use by other clinical colleagues has raised media interest and research into examples of unprofessional behaviour online have raised concerns that some HCPs may be unknowingly exposing themselves to risk in the way they are using these ‘web 2.0’ applications and uploading personal material onto the internet.

This guidance, developed by the AHP Directors Scotland Group is here to help you. It provides practical and ethical advice on the different issues that student and qualified AHPs in Scotland may encounter when using social media and has been adapted from the excellent guidance already published by the General Medical Council, British Medical Association and the Nursing & Midwifery Council.
Professional Code of Conduct: Applying the code to the use of social networking

Each AHP professional organisation has a code of conduct that their members should be aware of and adhere to. It is wise to refamiliarise yourself with your professions code of conduct before using social media. The codes set out the expectations for the conduct of people on each register, and are key tools used in fitness to practise proceedings to judge issues of personal and professional misconduct.

Each code clearly states that AHPs need to uphold the reputation of their profession at all times, and this includes students.

This means that conduct online and conduct in the real world should be judged in the same way, and should be of a similar high standard. In terms of using social media we do want AHPs to use this constructively but they should also be aware that there are some total ‘no no’s’ that could put their registration at risk if they:

- share confidential information online
- post inappropriate comments about colleagues or patients
- use social networking sites to bully or intimidate colleagues
- pursue personal relationships with patients or service users
- distribute sexually explicit material
- use social networking sites in any way which is unlawful

This list is not intended to be exhaustive. If there is any doubt about whether a particular activity online is acceptable, it can be useful to think through a real-world analogy. For example, manipulated photos that are intended to mock individuals would be considered offensive if printed and pinned on workplace notice boards, and are no less offensive when shared online, even when privately shared between friends.

Social networking sites are a relatively new phenomenon, and social norms of conduct and behaviour continue to evolve. It is important to intelligently review and reapply the principles of the code as new situations emerge. In that light, we will keep this advice under regular review, and would welcome feedback on its use in practice.

Practical advice for students and qualified staff using social networking sites

The standard of your conduct as a student or qualified member of staff, both online and offline, is important. The way you act online can jeopardise your ability to join and stay on your professions register. Make sure you read and understand your professional code. You should think through what this information means for you in practice, and if needed, take steps to change the way you use social networking sites.
Remember that everything you post online is public, even with the strictest privacy settings. Once something is online, it can be copied and redistributed, and it is easy to lose control of it. Presume that everything you post online will be permanent and will be shared.

Keep your personal and professional life separate as far as possible. For example, you could keep Facebook just for close friends and family, use Twitter for sharing information with people you may not know, and use LinkedIn for building and maintaining professional relationships.

If you identify yourself by your profession or as an AHP on Facebook, you should act responsibly at all times and uphold the reputation of your profession. Even if you do not identify yourself by your profession or as an AHP, be aware that your conduct online could still jeopardise your registration if it calls your fitness to practise into question.

Protect your own privacy. Think through what kinds of information you want to share and with whom, and adjust your privacy settings. On Facebook, you can adjust your privacy settings at group level to share different levels of information with different kinds of friends. Remember that the more your personal life is exposed through social networking sites, the more likely it is that this could have a negative impact.

Do not use social networks to build or pursue relationships with patients and service users, even if they are no longer in your care. If you receive a friendship request from a current or former patient, Facebook allows you to ignore this request without the person being informed, avoiding the need to give unnecessary offence.

Do not discuss work-related issues online, including conversations about patients or complaints about colleagues. Even when anonymised, these are likely to be inappropriate.

Never post pictures of patients or service users, even if they ask you to do this. The guidance on record keeping states clearly, you should not take or keep photographs of any person, or their family, that are not clinically relevant. If your mobile phone has a camera, you should not use it in the workplace.

Social networking sites should not be used for raising and escalating concerns (commonly referred to as whistleblowing). You should refer to your own professions guidance on raising and escalating concerns which sets out your professional duty to report any concerns which put the safety of people in your care or the public at risk, and the steps you should take to do this.

You can take action if you find yourself the target of complaints or abuse on social networking sites. You can remove someone from your friend list and block them from interacting with you, and most sites will include mechanisms to report abusive activity and provide support for users who are subject to abuse by others. If you are very concerned about someone else’s behaviour online, you should take steps to raise your concern, including if necessary with their university or employer. In the most serious circumstances, for example if someone’s use of a social networking site is unlawful, you should also report the incident to the police.
Additional advice for employers and educators

Professional organisations do not advocate blanket bans on their members joining or using social networking sites, and employers and educators should not suggest that this is the position. Even if such bans could be imposed on workplace or university computer networks, personal computers and mobile devices offer easy access. Blanket bans are likely therefore to be both unenforceable and counter-productive. We support the responsible use of social networking sites by AHPs in Scotland.

Given the large proportion of the population using social networking sites, healthcare providers and universities can derive benefits through engaging with social media, both at a corporate and individual level. Having a corporate presence on social networking sites can also lend credibility when engaging AHPs around these issues, and can provide a platform for encouraging responsible use.

Social networking policies and investigating complaints

- Organisations should set out clear policies for staff and students on their use of social networking sites, encouraging responsible use. Where a policy is targeted at HCPs, it should remind them of their responsibilities to their professional regulator, and direct them to this advice and other relevant standards and guidance.
- Organisations should also ensure that managers, and those responsible for enforcing policies on social networking sites, understand them and apply them consistently, particularly if they are handling complaints. In some cases, where an individual handling a complaint has limited or no experience of using social networking sites, it may be appropriate to encourage them to join personally, so that they can understand better the experiences of staff and students.
- Complaints about the use of social networking sites or other online activity should be taken as seriously as real-world events. Cyber-bullying for example, can be intrusive and distressing, and sharing confidential information online can be more damaging than sharing it verbally. When considering the circumstances of a complaint involving online activity, it can be useful to make a direct comparison with a real-world activity to ensure the seriousness of the complaint is judged appropriately.

Finally, this guidance is not meant to stifle use of social media but to ensure that AHPs in Scotland are able to use it responsibly and with confidence. Social media offers great opportunities for AHPs to better engage with a wide range of individuals and organisations and to raise awareness of the value and contribution AHPs make to the life of the people of Scotland. Any queries can be directed to local AHP Directors who will be happy to address any issues.
References

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