

---

## Social media and Canadian physicians: Issues and rules of engagement

---

### Important note:

**For Canadian physicians, regulations and guidelines from provincial regulatory authorities or employers take precedence over any of the guidance provided here. Certain regulatory authorities such as the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick have issued guidelines or statements with respect to social media.<sup>1</sup>**

### Social media: What does it mean?

Social media are everywhere in Canadian society today. From Facebook to YouTube to Twitter, everyone seems to be engaged in electronic communications in some form or another with friends, family, colleagues and even complete strangers on websites and through mobile applications. Social media have changed the way people build relationships, communicate, interact and gather and disseminate information.

To many people, social media are just the names of well-known online products — Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. But in the broader sense, social media can be defined as a set of web-based and mobile technologies that allow people to monitor, create, share or manipulate text, audio, photos or video, with others. This information can be shared unidirectionally (e.g. posting text to one's own blog) or multidirectionally (e.g. contributing to a discussion on an online forum). Social media places particular emphasis on interactive, user-driven communication.

### Social media and patients

There is currently widespread discussion among health care professionals, academics, social media observers and the public about how social media can and should be used in health care. The evidence base is currently lacking on whether the use of social media can improve patient outcomes.<sup>2</sup> But it is undeniable that the internet and social media platforms have become an integral part of

---

© 2011 Canadian Medical Association. You may, for your non-commercial use, reproduce, in whole or in part and in any form or manner, unlimited copies of CMA Policy Statements provided that credit is given to the original source. Any other use, including republishing, redistribution, storage in a retrieval system or posting on a Web site requires explicit permission from CMA. Please contact the Permissions Coordinator, Publications, CMA, 1867 Alta Vista Dr., Ottawa ON K1G 5W8; fax 613 565-2382; [permissions@cma.ca](mailto:permissions@cma.ca).

Correspondence and requests for additional copies should be addressed to the Member Service Centre, Canadian Medical Association, 1867 Alta Vista Drive, Ottawa, ON K1G 5W8; tel 888 855-2555 or 613 731-8610 x2307; fax 613 236-8864.

All policies of the CMA are available electronically through CMA Online ([www.cma.ca](http://www.cma.ca)).

how patients and members of the public seek information about health and increase the sense of engagement patients have in their own care. Through a variety of websites and fuelled by the growing availability of electronic patient health records, patients are increasingly sharing information with other patients about their health conditions and their health care providers.

### **Social media and physicians: risks and benefits**

For physicians, social media provide a unique set of opportunities and challenges. There is growing debate about whether the medical profession should play a role in using social media to communicate more effectively with individual patients and the patient community at large. The reality is that individual doctors and medical organizations have to consciously decide if, why and how to use the various social media platforms. While use of social media could potentially increase the exposure of physicians to disciplinary and medico-legal issues, those physicians who choose to use social media can help shape how these tools can improve health care in the future.

Social media pose a challenge for physicians (and other professionals) in terms of separating one's personal and professional lives. While such a separation is a fundamental tenet of the medical profession, social media blur such boundaries in ways that can enrich communications, but can also put physicians at risk. It is an entirely new environment that medical professionalism has not yet satisfactorily addressed.

When communicating through social media, physicians must remember they remain governed by the same ethical and professional

standards that have always applied and that are paramount.

As recent findings show, Canadian physicians believe social media present a variety of professional and legal risks, and they are uncertain of the potential benefits of these new forms of communication and interaction.<sup>3</sup>

### **CMA's role**

This document is intended to provide guidance on how Canadian medical students, residents, fellows and practising physicians can approach social media, by acknowledging the potential benefits as well as the challenges and risks.

While these guidelines are based on the best available evidence, this is a constantly evolving field where technological innovations can change the playing field almost overnight. As such, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) will review and update this document as required.

As an association, the CMA has a responsibility and obligation to its members to provide guidance about social media. In addition, the CMA monitors social media trends in health care and will attempt to speak for the profession as a whole to ensure social media are used in a way that provides maximum benefit to both patients and physicians.

The CMA acknowledges that, when social media become integrated into the health care delivery system, the individual provinces and territories will need to explore how to appropriately remunerate physicians for their time and activities.

## Key issues

### Patient confidentiality

- The privacy and security of individual patient information is paramount and should never be shared beyond the circle of care. This principle is also enshrined in CMA policy.<sup>4</sup> In communicating with an individual patient in other than a face-to-face environment, a secure electronic communication platform must be used.<sup>5</sup> Identifiable patient information, including images, should never be posted online or shared in electronic communications of a general nature.
- When using social media, physicians should endeavour to use the most stringent security and privacy settings available for the particular platform.
- Physicians with employees should make them aware of issues concerning patient confidentiality in their own use of social media. Consideration should be given to instituting a social media policy for the office or practice.
- Social networking sites cannot guarantee confidentiality. Anything written on a social networking site can theoretically be accessed and made public. For example, the Patriot Act in the United States makes it possible for the U.S. government under certain conditions to access any information posted on a social networking site or website hosted by a U.S. service provider, even if this information is located within the “private or direct message” area of the site.

## Professionalism

- Having an online profile or identifiable presence on social media can have the same degree of positive or negative impact on a physician’s social reputation as being active in any other public venue. In fact, having access to a global audience can magnify this reputation.
- The most effective use of social media often involves communicating information that is both personal and professional. However, physicians must retain the appropriate boundaries of the patient-physician relationship when dealing with individual patients. The same standards of professionalism that would apply in face-to-face physician-patient interactions also apply in electronic interactions.
- If a physician is an employee of a health care institution or organization that has social media guidelines in place, he or she should review these and act accordingly.

### Online communication issues

- Electronic communications are not anonymous and are always stored in some form. As such, it is possible to trace the author of a comment even if posted anonymously.
- Once their material is published online, authors of comments on social media sites no longer control how and where the information is disseminated, and these comments can sometimes lose context.
- Postings to social media sites are subject to the same laws of

copyright, libel and defamation as written or verbal communications.

#### Potential benefits

- More frequent communication with patients and the public improves the quality of medical care and satisfaction with physician care. Social media can enhance the role of traditional media in delivering important public health messages.
- Use of social media can provide patients and the public with quicker and easier access to medical expertise, often in a way that is more current, clear and concise than traditional media sources.
- Posting (with copyright permission) evidence-based medical information on social media sites can improve the quality of health information made available to patients and the public

#### Rules of engagement

The following should be kept in mind when using social media:

- Understand the technology and your audience  
  
The many social media platforms work in different ways and often have different goals. Even broad types of social media such as social networking sites have different terms and conditions under which they operate. Some social networking sites, for example Facebook, are intended for use by everyone, but you set your own network of people you know.

Others, like Twitter, are designed for interacting with people you might not know at all. And others still, such as Asklepios, are intended for peer-to-peer interaction between Canadian physicians only. In order to use social media effectively, it is necessary to have a good understanding of how they work and who your intended audience will be before using them.

- Be transparent

Identify clearly who you are and any potential conflicts of interest you may have in association with information you are providing. Being transparent encourages more honest interaction with others and a more productive outcome. If you are discussing medical or health issues, it is probably beneficial to identify yourself as a physician. If you are employed by an institution or organization, you should state either that you are reflecting corporate policies or that the views expressed are yours alone and not those of your employer.

When participating on a social networking site such as Facebook that may include patients in your practice, you should avoid communicating personal or private information. It is possible to establish a professional page, where you can post information about your practice and general health information and links.

- Respect others  
  
If you are posting information created by somebody else, proper permission should be obtained and acknowledgement given. Most social media sites have their own sets of rules, guidelines and etiquette, and these should be followed. If uncertain of how a specific site operates, spend more time listening and reading, prior to engaging in active dialogue. Always respect the principle of patient confidentiality.

- Focus on areas of expertise  
  
As a physician you can often bring most value to a forum or conversation by discussing issues on which you have a particular expertise. Sharing this information – as long as it does not contravene individual patient confidentiality – raises the level of discourse on social media sites and is likely to be viewed favourably by other participants.

You should anticipate that the information you provide on social media may be challenged by both other physicians and non-physicians. Remember to keep the tenor of the debate at a civilized level and do not be unnecessarily offended if your viewpoint is rejected, even if you do feel it is based on best available evidence.

If you choose to use your own website to communicate to a non-medical audience about medical or health

issues, you should include a terms of use agreement to advise users that information is intended for Canadian residents and that individual health queries will not be addressed.<sup>6</sup>

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> [College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia Social Media and Online Networking Forums \(https://www.cpsbc.ca/files/u6/Social-Media-and-Online-Networking-Forums.pdf\)](https://www.cpsbc.ca/files/u6/Social-Media-and-Online-Networking-Forums.pdf) ;  
College of Physicians and Surgeons of New Brunswick Facebook Guidelines (<http://www.cpsnb.org/english/Guidelines/Facebook.htm>)

<sup>2</sup> However, numerous research studies are showing that social media tools and resources are being used to provide patients with health information and attempt to change health-related behaviours. See, for example, the abstracts of presentations from the four Med 2.0: Social Media and Web 2.0 in Health conferences

(<http://www.medicine20congress.com/ocs/index.php/med/med2011>),

or papers published in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* (<http://www.jmir.org/>)

<sup>3</sup> [Social media use by physicians \(http://www.cma.ca/advocacy/social-media-use-physicians\)](http://www.cma.ca/advocacy/social-media-use-physicians)

<sup>4</sup> CMA Health Information Privacy Code ([http://www.cma.ca/index.php?ci\\_id=53584&la\\_id=1](http://www.cma.ca/index.php?ci_id=53584&la_id=1))

<sup>5</sup> CMA Physician Guidelines for Online Communications with Patients (<http://policybase.cma.ca/dbtw-wpd/PolicyPDF/PD05-03.pdf>)

<sup>6</sup> Health promotion: CMPA will assist ([http://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/cmpapd04/docs/member\\_assistance\\_more/com\\_is0890-e.cfm](http://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/cmpapd04/docs/member_assistance_more/com_is0890-e.cfm))