Guidance on Professional Conduct when using Social Media

Introduction

There is widespread use of social media amongst health and social care professionals and the public. Individuals should be free to take advantage of the many personal and professional benefits that social media can offer, whilst being aware of the potential risks that using it may present.

This guidance provides practical and ethical advice on the different issues that health and social care professionals and students may encounter when using social media. It should be read in conjunction with any workplace Social Media policy. People may feel less inhibited when posting comments online and as a result may say things they would not express in other circumstances. Individuals should exercise sound judgement when posting online and avoid making gratuitous, unsubstantiated or unsustainable negative comments about individuals or organisations.

Key points regarding social media:
- It can blur the boundary between an individual's public and professional life.
- It can be an effective tool for professionals to network and share good practice.
- Individuals should consider adopting conservative privacy settings.
- Ethical and legal duty to protect client confidentiality applies.
- Language used should be both professional and appropriate.
- Individuals should be conscious of their online image and how it may impact on them, their profession, and their employer.
- Information placed on social media can be shared publicly and it may not be possible to delete/remove it.

Ethical Responsibilities and Social Media

Client confidentiality

Social media can provide individuals with a space in which they can discuss their experiences within practice. As material published on the internet exists in the public domain, it is important that professionals exercise caution when discussing any details relating to people/places. Disclosing identifiable information about people/places would constitute a breach of professional code/standards and General Data Protection Regulations (further information can be found [here](#)).

Confidentiality extends to colleague identification through social media.

If you are aware of colleagues using social media inappropriately then seek advice regarding your duty to raise concerns.

Further guidance on maintaining confidentially;
Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015); The Code: Professional Standards of Practice and Behaviour for Nurses and Midwives.
Health and Care Professions Council (2017); Confidentiality – Guidance for Registrants.
Health and Care Professions Council (2017) *Guidance on Social Media.*
Maintaining Confidentiality in the Faculty of Health & Applied Sciences

Maintaining boundaries

Social and Professional relationships
It is possible that individuals may know people socially, then encounter them in a professional capacity. It is important that professional boundaries exist to maintain trust and protect everyone in this situation. The professional/social relationship should be maintained appropriately and according to the situation.

Education and Employment/Private or Public
Prospective employers may review the social media presence of potential employees. Organisations/individuals may access publicly available personal content uploaded to social media and any material judged to be inappropriate could have a detrimental impact on professional standing. Once posted a permanent record has been created and deleting content does not necessarily erase it from view (privacy settings do not guarantee privacy); the appropriateness of posting content should be considered before uploading and consideration should be given to the potential impact of 'private' posts being viewed publicly.

Evidence of unprofessional behaviour can lead to disciplinary action; examples include healthcare professionals being suspended or struck off for posting inappropriate pictures/comments on social media. A simple rule to follow is not to post anything that you would be uncomfortable seeing in the press.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) highlight that unprofessional behaviour or acting unlawfully on social media can put their registration at risk (NMC, 2012). Any reference to work or study posted on social media should demonstrate respect and professionalism.

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) advocate using professional judgement but if in doubt to seek advice – they also encourage registrants to 'keep on posting!' (HCPC, 2017).

Legal Implications

It is important that professionals are able to engage fully in debates about issues that affect their professional lives such as policy; increasingly the internet is the forum in which this takes place. The freedom that individuals have to voice their opinions on forums and blogs can be restricted by the need to prevent harm to the rights and reputations of others.

Defamation law can apply to any comments posted on the web; an unjustified statement considered to harm reputation could result in legal action being taken against the individual and the organisation (academic or practice setting).

There may also be issues including, but not limited to, copyright, cyber bullying, and breaching equality and diversity rights, such issues may be considered within the context of the UWE Student Conduct Policy or the UWE Professional Suitability Policy.

Professional Advice and Social Media
Information is readily available through online sources and individuals may use these, including social media, to seek professional advice. Professional advice should be limited to facts and

signposting, personal advice should not be offered unless your employment requires you to undertake this as part of your role.

Research and Social Media

The UWE Research Ethics Committee has produced a document on the use of social media in research, it can be found on the research ethics web pages; https://public.uwe.ac.uk/services/Marketing/research/doc/ethicsandprocedures/Guidance_on_research_using_social_media_Nov%202017.pdf

Further Information;

Health and Care Professions Council (2017) *Guidance on Social Media.* Available from: https://www.hcpc-uk.org/publications/brochures/index.asp?id=1394 [Accessed 26 September 2018]

Health and Care Professions Council (2017); *Confidentiality – Guidance for Registrants.* Available from: http://www.hcpc-uk.org/assets/documents/100023F1GuidanceonconfidentialityFINAL.pdf [Accessed 03 October 2018].

NHS (2018) *Information governance considerations for staff on the use of instant messaging software in acute clinical settings*. Available from: https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKEwj95ZDDn_LeAhUsAsAKHQUADHUQFjAAegQIChAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdigital.nhs.uk%2Fbinaries%2Fcontent%2Fassets%2Fwebsite-assets%2Fdata-and-information%2Fig-resources%2Finformation-governance-considerations-for-individuals-on-the-use-of-instant-messaging-software-in-acute-clinical-settings.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2s_ocfkj1UglD_MOOfQx2A [Accessed 29 November 2018]

NHS Employers (2017) The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust – Using Social Media to aid Nurse Recruitment. Accessed from: http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/social-media-guidelines [Accessed 26 November 2018]

NHS Employers (2017) Using Social Media in Leadership. Accessed from: http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/social-media-guidelines [Accessed 26 November 2018]

NHS Employers (2017) Factsheet: Top Digital Communications Tips to help shape STPS. Accessed from: http://www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/social-media-guidelines [Accessed 26 November 2018]

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2012) *Guidance on Using Social Media Responsibly.* Available from: https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/nmc-publications/social-media-guidance.pdf [Accessed 26 September 2018]

Nursing and Midwifery Council (2015); *The Code: Professional Standards of Practice and Behaviour for Nurses and Midwives.* Available from: https://www.nmc.org.uk/globalassets/sitedocuments/nmc-publications/nmc-code.pdf [Accessed 03 October 2018]