

Social Media User Guidance – Summary

At a Glance

The purpose of the College of Paramedics Social Media User Guidance - College Members is to provide advice on how to develop appropriate behaviour in relation to the personal and professional use of social media. It aims to increase members' understanding of the legal, regulatory and professional framework within which the use of social media sits and the potential consequences, both personal and professional, of its inappropriate use.

Social media provides both benefits and challenges; paramedics both nationally and internationally can share knowledge and information, debate critical issues and keep up to date with developments in practice. However being aware of potential pitfalls is essential; social media is not peer reviewed for instance and the maintaining of professional and personal boundaries can be challenging.

Legal, regulatory and professional considerations apply to paramedics as allied health professionals or students when using social media. What you make public about your personal life on social media sites could have an impact on your employment and professional standing. Inappropriate comments written and shared have potential to breach a number of laws or regulations; from data protection, defamation or harassment laws to HCPC or employer regulations.

Social media is a public domain and you should be aware that while on-line you are still representing the profession and your employer and should be aware of how you could be viewed by society/service users/colleagues/other agencies/the media/ governing bodies. There are increasing numbers of paramedics being involved in social networking disciplinary cases; the internet is not anonymous, nor does it forget. Everything written on the internet can be traced back to its author very easily and there is a permanent record which is accessible to all.

The following is a list of dos and don'ts for effective and responsible use of social media while avoiding negative personal or professional consequences.

Do use social media effectively and responsibly:

- Think about why you want to use social media, what you want to say, to whom, how and why;
- Avoid jargon or abbreviations to ensure your audience will understand what you are trying to say;
- Ensure your contributions are based on fact/evidence;
- Set privacy settings to ensure only known or invited individuals can access your social media;
- Get written consent from patients before using images on social media sites;
- Recognise that everything you post online contributes to building a digital record about yourself (which may not easily be deleted);
- Be transparent if contributing to social media sites in a work or official capacity;
- Respect the 'house rules' of the social media site (terms of use etc);
- Adjust your communication style on social networking sites which are usually informal in nature;
- Remember, if being photographed or being featured in a video clip, be professional in dress and manner;

- Remember to take a proportional approach if you have to tackle negative or inappropriate comments on social networking sites. Try to solve the issue informally if appropriate. If this does not solve the matter or the original posting is serious enough to warrant moving straight to a more formal approach, refer on to the appropriate individual or organisation. For example, for an advertising issue go to the Advertising Standards Authority <http://www.asa.org.uk/>. For a dispute between colleagues seek advice from your workplace steward, or from Human Resources or Management. If you are worried about a breach of patient confidentiality, discuss it with management.

To avoid negative personal or professional consequences when using social media don't:

- Assume your contributions to social networking sites are private. Even if you have employed privacy settings, friends or followers can forward items outside your network and make them public;
- Post any comment or image you would not be happy to see on the BBC news;
- State your place of work on your personal Facebook/Twitter account (unless you have permission to do so);
- Use social media to criticise a colleague, manager or employer;
- Use social networking sites to whistle blow. Use HCPC guidance on this topic instead;
- Breach patient or employer confidentiality;
- Accept friend requests from patients;
- Send friend requests to patients;
- Gossip about colleagues, patients, your employer etc;
- Violate intellectual property law (e.g. copyright or trademark);
- Harass anyone, or discriminate against anyone in your postings;
- Speak on behalf of people or organisations without their express permission;
- Escalate situations by getting into a war of words online; bear in mind social networking sites are public spaces.

'Stop and think' social media checklist:

- Does your contribution positively promote your role as a paramedic or student?
- Does your contribution reflect positively on your co-workers/colleagues?
- Does your contribution conflict with your employer's mission, culture, values and/or policies?
- Does your contribution reveal confidential patient or proprietary business information?
- Does your contribution include any information that could directly or indirectly identify a patient under your care?
- Do you understand how the social media you are using works, including the privacy settings?