



GUIDELINE

Physician Use of Social Media

STATUS:	DRAFT
Approved by Council:	Month/Year
Amended:	n/a
To be reviewed:	n/a

1. Preamble

This document is a guideline of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan (the “College” or “CPSS”) intended for the guidance of Saskatchewan physicians.

The rapid expansion of social media has created opportunities for physicians but has also created risk. Physicians may choose to use social media with the following goals:

- to increase patient access to general medical information
- to responsibly advocate for patient care, improvements to the system and patient safety
- to advocate for the profession.

In doing so, physicians must be mindful of their legal, professional and ethical obligations that extend to the arena of social media. These include the duty to maintain patient privacy and confidentiality; the duty to maintain the appropriate boundaries of a patient-physician relationship; broad-based expectations of professionalism; and the duty to respect copyright laws and other legal obligations.

2. Purpose and scope of this Guideline

This Guideline is not intended to restrict any physician’s right to freedom of speech. However, it is intended to guide physicians in the appropriate use of social media, taking into account the applicable professional, ethical and legal obligations.

In this context, “social media” refers to web and mobile technologies and practices through which users search for and share content, opinions, experiences and perspectives online. Examples include but are not limited to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, online forums, blogging sites and podcasts.

This Guideline does not establish any new expectations for physicians; rather, it is intended to provide general guidance and recommendations based on existing professional, ethical and legal obligations and their application in the social media context.

In addition to following this Guideline, physicians, residents and medical students are reminded to be familiar and comply with any other applicable policies such as those established by the Saskatchewan Health Authority, College of Medicine, or the facility in which they work.

3. Guiding principles

The following guiding principles are applicable:

- Expectations of professional and ethical conduct are the same whether physicians are interacting in person or online through social media. This can include expectations set out in *The Medical Profession Act, 1981*, the CPSS Regulatory Bylaws, and CPSS policies, standards and guidelines.
- The confidentiality of information posted on social media can never be guaranteed.
- Physicians may want to consider establishing a separate personal and professional social media presence.

4. General guidelines for physicians using social media

a) Privacy

- Read, understand and apply the strictest privacy settings necessary to maintain control over access to your personal information. However, be aware that privacy settings are imperfect; assume content on the internet is public and widely accessible.
- Respect the privacy of patients, colleagues and co-workers.

b) Confidentiality of patient information

- Do not post identifiable patient information or patient images to social media unless you have informed consent from the patient. Be mindful that an unnamed patient may be identifiable through minimal information such as area of residence and a general description of condition. This applies even in a closed or private online forum.

c) Professional boundaries

- Maintain clear boundaries and avoid establishing personal connections with patients online.
- Do not provide specific clinical advice to individual patients through social media.

d) Professionalism

- Exercise caution when posting personal information on social media platforms.
- Do not post content that could be viewed as unprofessional.
- Maintain professional and respectful relationships with patients, colleagues and other members of the health-care team.
- If engaging in online debate, focus on the issues and avoid disparaging personal comments.

e) Legal obligations

- Be mindful that defamatory statements published online may result in allegations of libel or slander.
- Plagiarism and copyright infringements may also lead to legal action. Always provide credit and links back to original sources when sharing information.

- Represent your credentials accurately and declare conflicts of interest where applicable.
- Comply with the relevant guidance with respect to physician advertising.

RELATED CPSS RESOURCES

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan [all to be linked in final version]

- Regulatory Bylaw 7.1 – The Code of Ethics
- Regulatory Bylaw 7.2 – Code of Conduct
- Regulatory Bylaw 9.1 -- Conflict of Interest
- Regulatory Bylaw Part 7 – Advertising
- Guideline “Patient-Physician Communication Using Electronic Communications”
- Guideline “Confidentiality of Patient Information”
- Guideline “Conflict of Interest”

OTHER RESOURCES

University of Saskatchewan College of Medicine

- Post-graduate Medical Education Policy “Appropriate Use of Social Media”
<https://medicine.usask.ca/policies/appropriate-use-of-social-media.php>

Canadian Medical Protective Association

- “Top 10 tips for using social media in professional practice” <https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/browse-articles/2014/top-10-tips-for-using-social-media-in-professional-practice>
- “Good Practices Guide – Social Media” https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/serve/docs/ela/goodpracticesguide/pages/professionalism/Social_media/developing_your_digital_presence-e.html
- “Social media: The opportunities, the reality” <https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/browse-articles/2014/social-media-the-opportunities-the-realities>
- “Social networks in healthcare: Opportunities and challenges for a connected future” <https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/browse-articles/2017/social-networks-in-healthcare-opportunities-and-challenges-for-a-connected-future>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In developing this guideline, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan referenced the following documents:

- the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta Advice to the Profession “Social Media”
- the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia Professional Guideline “Social Media”
- the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario document “Social Media – Appropriate Use by Physicians”.

The College recognizes, with thanks, the contributions of those organizations to the development of this guideline.