
Information for registrants

Guidance on social media

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Introduction

About this document

We have written this document to provide guidance to registrants who use social media. It explains how to use social media in a way which meets our standards.

This document cannot address every issue that might come up. We have instead focused on the issues registrants and other stakeholders told us they came across most frequently.

This guidance is focused on our standards. Some professional bodies publish social media guidelines to support their members to get the most from this technology. If you are employed, your employer may also have relevant policies or guidance that apply to you.

How this document is structured

This document is divided into four sections.

- Section 1 provides information about the HCPC.
- Section 2 contains some top tips for using social media.
- Section 3 provides guidance on how our standards relate to the use of social media, and some relevant issues you may come across.
- Section 4 contains information about how to find out more.

Language

Throughout this document:

- ‘we’ and ‘us’ refers to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC);
- ‘registrant’ refers to a professional on our Register;
- ‘you’ or ‘your’ refers to a registrant; and
- ‘social media’ refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, and to interact with other users. This includes – but is not limited to - websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as online forums, and blogs.

Section 1:

About us

About us

We are the Health and Care Professions Council.

We are a regulator and were set up to protect the public. To do this, we keep a Register of professionals who meet our standards for their professional skills, knowledge and behaviour. Individuals on our Register are called 'registrants'.

We currently regulate 15 professions.

Professions we regulate

- Arts therapists
- Biomedical scientists
- Chiropodists / podiatrists
- Clinical scientists
- Dietitians
- Hearing aid dispensers
- Occupational therapists
- Operating department practitioners
- Orthoptists
- Paramedics
- Physiotherapists
- Practitioner psychologists
- Prosthetists / orthotists
- Radiographers
- Speech and language therapists

About the standards

We set standards of conduct, performance and ethics, which set out the high level principles of how we expect registrants to behave. We use the standards when a concern has been raised about a registrant, to help us decide whether we need to take action to protect the public.

As a registrant, you must make sure you are familiar with the standards and that you continue to meet them at all times.

Section 2:

Top tips

The following are some top tips for using social media in a way which meets our standards. You can find information about how to put these into practice in the next section of this document.

- **Think before you post.** Assume that what you post could be shared and read by anyone.
- **Think about who can see what you share** and manage your privacy settings accordingly. Remember that privacy settings cannot guarantee that something you post will not be publicly visible.
- **Maintain appropriate professional boundaries** if you communicate with colleagues, service users or carers.
- **Do not post confidential or service user identifiable information.**
- **Do not post inappropriate or offensive material.** Use your professional judgement about whether something you share falls below the professional standards expected of you.
- If you are employed, you will **also** need to ensure you **follow your employer's social media policy.**
- When in doubt, **seek advice.** Appropriate sources might include experienced colleagues, trade unions and professional bodies. You can also contact us if you are unsure about our standards. If you think something could be inappropriate or offensive, refrain from posting it.
- **Keep on posting!** We know that many registrants find using social media beneficial and do so without any issues. There's no reason why registrants shouldn't keep on using it with confidence.

Section 3:

Using social media

The vast majority of registrants who use social media already do so responsibly, in line with our standards, and without any difficulties at all. However, we know that registrants sometimes have questions or concerns about using social media because they want to make sure that they always meet our standards.

This guidance explains what our standards mean when using social media, both privately and professionally. We have structured the guidance below under the areas of our standards which apply to the appropriate use of social media. It is important that you follow this guidance, and any guidance issued by your employer.

Respect confidentiality

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

‘You must treat information about service users as confidential’ (5.1)

Confidentiality is an essential consideration in all areas of a professional’s practice, and is particularly important in the context of social media.

When you post information about another person on social media, think about whether it is appropriate to share that information. If the information is confidential and/or could allow a service user to be identified, you should not put it on a site without their consent. This could include information about their personal life, health or circumstances, or images relating to their care.

For consent to be valid, it must be voluntary and informed, and the person giving consent must have the capacity to make the decision. They must understand and not object to:

- the information being disclosed or shared;
- the reason for the disclosure;
- the people or organisations the information will be shared with; and
- how the information will be used.

Your primary focus should be on delivering the best possible care to meet the service user’s needs. A service user who is anxious, distressed or in pain may be unable to give informed consent to anything other than immediate care.

Even if you have the highest level of privacy settings, something you share online can quickly be copied and redistributed to a much wider audience. This means a post can stay in the public domain after you delete it. Try to stay up to date with any changes to the privacy settings of the social media platforms you use. If you are unsure whether to post, stop and seek advice first from an experienced colleague, professional body or trade union.

For further information, please see the HCPC’s [Guidance on Confidentiality](#).

Section 3:

Using social media

Communicate appropriately

The standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

‘You must use all forms of communication appropriately and responsibly, including social media and networking websites’ (2.7)

You should apply the same standards as you would when communicating in other ways when using social media. Be polite and respectful, and avoid using language that others might reasonably consider to be inappropriate or offensive. Use your professional judgement in deciding whether to post or share something. Remember that comments or posts may be taken out of context, or made visible to a wider audience than originally intended.

Be honest and trustworthy

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

‘You must make sure that your conduct justifies the public’s trust and confidence in you and your profession’ (9.1)

This means you need to think about who can see what you share. Make sure you understand the privacy settings of each social media channel that you use. Even on a completely personal account, your employer, colleagues or service users may be able to see your posts or personal information. It is best to assume that anything you post online will be visible to everyone.

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

‘You must make sure that any promotional activities you are involved in are accurate and are not likely to mislead’ (9.3)

If you use social media to advertise or share information related to your professional practice, you must make sure it is fair and true to the best of your knowledge. You may choose to include a disclaimer on your profile that your views are your own, and that they do not represent the views of your employer or those who contract your services.

Maintain appropriate boundaries

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

‘You must keep your relationships with service users and carers professional.’ (1.7)

Some professionals find using social media a valuable way of communicating with service users and the public. However, social media can blur the boundaries between the personal and the professional. It is just as important to maintain appropriate boundaries when using social media as it would be if you were communicating through any other medium. You must always communicate with service users in a professional manner.

You might decide to set up a separate professional account where you provide general information for service users and the public. If you are employed and plan to use this account to have direct contact with service users, you should first agree whether this is appropriate with your employer.

Section 3:

Using social media

Keep in mind that service users may still be able to find and contact you via your personal account. If this happens, we recommend that you decline invitations, follows or friend requests. If appropriate, indicate that you cannot mix social and professional relationships. If you wish to follow up any contact you receive, consider using a more secure communication channel, such as your professional email account.

We recognise that as social media/networking is evolving rapidly, and that as use of these tools increases, there are increasingly blurred lines between professional and personal use. Registrants should take account of the standards of conduct, performance and ethics, and standards of proficiency to assist them in determining that distinction, using their professional judgement to come to a final decision.

If you include content relating to your professional role on a personal account or vice versa, think about whether you would be happy for these different audiences to see the material you post. Think carefully about what you share and who can see it.

Benefits of social media

We know social media can help our registrants in a variety of ways:

- Some use social media messaging services to help them **communicate quickly and effectively** with colleagues across hospitals to ensure service user care is the best it can be; checking approaches with supervisors, and considering complex cases in a time effective way. In doing so, registrants should be mindful not to share personal details, and take care to follow employer policies.
- A great deal of **learning is carried** out through social networking platforms, where colleagues undertaking weekend CPD activities come together to discuss specialist areas of practice, making use of a wider pool of individuals, available at any time. Registrants should be mindful to maintain appropriate professional boundaries and not to post inappropriate material.

- Some registrants use news and social networking services to **raise the profile of their profession and reach out to the public**. This can be a quick and easy way to show people how dedicated and hardworking our registrants are, show the public what they do, and highlight the services they provide. When sharing live information in order to raise the profile of the profession, registrants should take care to only share information required to achieve that objective, and they should act in accordance with relevant employer policies.

They should post in a modest manner; only providing the information the public needs to understand the role, and they should ensure any additional information, in particular service user identifiable information, isn't included. Your primary focus should be on delivering the best possible care to meet the service user's needs. **It is important to remember that a service user who is anxious, distressed or in pain may be unable to give informed consent to anything other than immediate care, such as participation in live social media tweets.**

Section 4:

More information

You can contact us if you have any questions about this guidance or our standards. However, we cannot offer legal advice. Our contact details are below.

The Health and Care Professions Council
Park House
184 Kennington Park Road
London
SE11 4BU

Phone: +44 (0)300 500 6184

You can download copies of our standards documents and other publications from our website at www.hcpc-uk.org

Other sources of guidance

We recognise the valuable role professional bodies play in representing and promoting the interests of their members. This often includes guidance and advice about good practice which can help you meet the standards that we set.

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