

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to the profession to support physicians in implementing the CPSA Standards of Practice. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Advice to the Profession documents are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice. Major changes will be communicated to our members; however, minor edits may only be noted within the documents.

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**Note: This version replaces the previous Social Media Advice to the Profession document published October 2014.**

The use of social media has expanded enormously in the last decade. Social media has rapidly become an important method of communication as well as a forum for expressing opinions and debate. Understandably, many physicians engage in these activities through their use of social media. While social media offers many useful functions, its use also comes with some risks.

CPSA recognizes and supports that advocacy, either for patients, the health care system or a physician’s personal livelihood, has always been an important component of the profession. CPSA also recognizes and supports the right and, arguably, societal responsibility physicians have to challenge authority when they feel it is required.

Maintaining professionalism is a key tenet of being a physician, especially when it comes to communicating with others. As individuals, physicians are very fortunate to have credibility and the respect of society simply by being part of the profession. Unfortunately, this means the actions of one physician, which may be perceived negatively, can tarnish the view of the profession as a whole. This results in the loss of credibility, respect and influence that each individual physician holds. In the world of social media, the credibility of a profession can be challenged on a daily basis, and it only takes a few comments perceived the wrong way to have a dramatic and long lasting impact on the profession.

It's important to highlight this document is not intended to restrict any physician's right to free speech. CPSA is providing this advice since we believe it's important to guide physicians in how best to communicate in this environment to help prevent any miscommunication that could put both the individual physician and the profession as a whole at risk.

## **CPSA Perspective**

Social media provides the ability to share, receive and review information globally and instantaneously, including medical information. With new tools coming online regularly, social media can include, but is not limited to:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Instagram
- YouTube
- Blogs

While email is not traditionally considered social media, content sent in an email can be easily shared on social media networks; additional caution should be taken when drafting emails. For more information, please review the [Electronic Communication & Security of Mobile Devices](#) Advice to the Profession.

Social media can be used to enhance patient care by increasing Albertans' access to information. Social media can also be used to responsibly advocate for patient care, patient safety and improvements to the healthcare system. Physicians can use social media to advocate for the profession and their individual practices; however it is not appropriate to leverage the physician-patient relationship for self-advocacy. Given the public and personal nature of social media, the quick, irreversible and widespread

dissemination of information and the blurring of [boundaries](#), social media presents a number of challenges to physicians.

The unintended consequence of using social media may place physicians at risk of breaching required expectations of [privacy and confidentiality](#).

## Professionalism

While it is recommended that physicians maintain separate professional and personal social media accounts, it can be extremely difficult for social media users to separate the two. For this reason, physicians should be cautious about everything they post to avoid undermining their professional integrity. Posts on social media should be respectful; [conflicts of interest](#) should be mitigated, and information presented must be accurate while avoiding a misrepresentation of facts. Advocating for patients and an effective healthcare system is important, and physicians are free to engage in economic and political debate online; however, when providing contrary opinions, it should be done in a professional manner.

Maintain respect for patients, colleagues, co-workers and others, and be careful not to denigrate anyone online. It is important to focus on issues and avoid personal attacks. A rule of thumb might be to only post content in a manner you would be comfortable being posted about yourself. Everything posted and shared – personally or professionally – can be linked back to an individual’s practice, office or clinic and colleagues. Remember that professionalism includes the [responsibility for and ownership of](#) a social media presence, and physicians retain ultimate responsibility for the content shared under their account(s). As a result, CPSA expects physicians to hold themselves accountable to the standards of professional behavior while posting online, regardless of using their professional identity, personal identity or posting under a pseudonym.

## Boundaries

[Boundaries](#) are much more difficult to maintain when using social networking sites, both professionally and socially. Dual relationships (social/professional) should be avoided whenever possible.

Be aware of the potential for [conflict of interest](#) wherever a dual relationship exists in your online connections, and ensure it does not significantly affect the professional [physician-patient relationship](#).

## Confidentiality of Health Information

As required for practice in general, always maintain the confidentiality of patient information. Social media sites do not provide a secure platform for confidential physician-patient interactions and should not be used for this purpose.

Never post identifiable patient information or patient images online; this can include names, clinical conditions or their area of residence.

## Professional & Legal Obligations

Represent your credentials accurately, and declare [conflicts of interest](#) when applicable. Remember laws about defamation, copyright and plagiarism also apply to social media: exercise the same caution you would when preparing written publications. Always provide credit and links back to original sources when sharing information.

Do not give medical advice to individual patients on social networking sites: giving specific medical advice to a patient is considered [telemedicine, requiring relevant follow-up and continuity of care](#) and [must be provided on secure platforms, never on a public site](#).

Physicians posting on social media must hold themselves accountable to CPSA's [Standards of Practice](#), [Code of Conduct](#) and the [CMA Code of Ethics & Professionalism](#) in social media settings

The scope of CPSA's *Code of Conduct* extends to any environment where a physician can interact or be visible to patients and the public, including social media settings.

## Resources

CPSA staff is available to speak with physicians who have questions or concerns. Please direct inquiries to [Chantelle.Dick@cpsa.ab.ca](mailto:Chantelle.Dick@cpsa.ab.ca).

### RELATED STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

- [Advertising](#)
- [Boundary Violations: Personal](#)
- [Boundary Violations: Sexual](#)
- [Code of Ethics & Professionalism](#)
- [Conflict of Interest](#)
- [Continuity of Care](#)

- [\*Job Action\*](#)
- [\*Patient Record Content\*](#)
- [\*Responsibility for a Medical Practice\*](#)
- [\*Telemedicine\*](#)

#### **COMPANION RESOURCES**

- CPSA's [\*Code of Conduct\*](#)
- The Alberta Medical Association:
  - [\*Going Social\*](#)
  - [\*Medical professionalism & social media: danger or opportunity?\*](#)
- CMPA:
  - [\*Top 10 tips for using social media in professional practice\*](#)
  - [\*Social media: the opportunities, the realities\*](#)
  - [\*Social networks in healthcare\*](#)
- CanMEDS:
  - [\*Health Advocate Role of Physicians\*](#)