

Social media – personal use

According to statistics on social media use in the UK in 2022, 84.3 per cent of the population are active users. It is therefore no surprise that MDDUS is seeing an increased number of advice calls relating to social media issues. Although there are many benefits of using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok and LinkedIn, it is important to understand the potential risks and how this can blur boundaries between a doctor's personal and professional life.

Basic considerations

The General Medical Council (GMC) provides clear guidance on the personal use of social media and what conduct is expected of you as a doctor.

It states: "You should be aware of the limitations of privacy online and you should regularly review the privacy settings for each of your social media profiles."

In order to maintain control of your personal information, it is important to remember that social media sites cannot absolutely guarantee confidentiality despite privacy settings being in place. For example, your own page may be set to private however if you comment on a thread or even 'like' another status, depending on that person's privacy settings, your interactions with them may then be visible to the public or their friends list.

It is also possible that a patient may try to contact you through social media. The GMC advises: "If a patient contacts you about their care or other professional matters through your private profile, you should indicate that you cannot mix social and professional relationships and, where appropriate, direct them to your professional profile."

There are certain social media platforms doctors can use that are not accessible to the public. These may be useful in allowing professionals to share ideas or work collaboratively, but you must still be careful not to disclose any patient identifiable information.

Further guidance hyperlinks: <https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/doctors-use-of-social-media/doctors-use-of-social-media#paragraph-4>

Common pitfalls

It is essential to maintain patient confidentiality at all times, even when contributing to a closed group with other health professionals. You should never disclose any information that may allow others to identify a patient.

It can be tempting to 'offload' online after a frustrating work day, or to get embroiled in online discussions about hot topics. While this is understandable, the GMC is clear that you must maintain professionalism at all times, even when not on duty, and must not post or share inappropriate content. This includes having respect for colleagues and other organisations.

It is prudent not to get into discussion online with your patients about any aspect of their care. This can blur the boundaries within the doctor-patient relationship. It is important to be firm with patients who try to persuade you to open a dialogue with them in this way, perhaps using a private messaging service on a social media platform. If they do so, politely and professionally redirect them to the appropriate means of making an appointment with you or a colleague.

If you identify yourself as a doctor on social media, the GMC makes clear that you should also identify yourself by name. Its guidance states: "Any material written by authors who represent themselves as doctors is likely to be taken on trust and may reasonably be taken to represent the views of the profession more widely."

Even when posting material anonymously or under an alias, be aware that this can be often traced back to its original source.

Key points

- Be aware of GMC guidance when using social media for personal and professional matters.
- Check your privacy settings to make sure your online activity is only accessible to those you wish to see it.
- Avoid being 'friends' with patients in order to maintain professional boundaries.
- If you identify yourself as a doctor in discussions or threads you should use your real name on your profile.
- Be aware of your organisation's social media policy where applicable.