
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 deal with every issue that might come up. Instead, we have focused on the issues that registrants and others 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 three sections.

- Section 1 contains some top tips for using social media.
- Section 2 provides guidance on how our standards relate to using social media and some relevant issues you may come across.
- Section 3 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;
- ‘service user’ refers to anyone who uses or is affected by the services of registrants, for example, patients or clients; and
- ‘social media’ refers to websites and applications that allow you to create and share content and to interact with other users. This includes, but is not limited to, websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as online forums and blogs.

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.

About the standards

We set standards of conduct, performance and ethics, which set out 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.

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

Section 1:

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 information which could identify a service user unless you have their permission.**
- **Do not post inappropriate or offensive material.** Use your professional judgement in deciding whether to post or share something.
- If you are employed, **follow your employer's social media policy.**
- When in doubt, **get 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, do not post 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 you shouldn't keep on using it with confidence.

Section 2:

Using social media

Benefits of social media

Registrants have told us that using social media lets them:

- develop and share their skills and knowledge;
- help the public understand what they do;
- network with other professionals nationally and internationally; and
- raise the profile of their profession.

Most 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. We have set out the guidance below under the areas of our standards which apply to the appropriate use of 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)

When using social media you should apply the same standards as you would when communicating in other ways. 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, as far as you know. 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 anyone who contracts your services.

Section 2:

Using social media

Respect confidentiality

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

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

When you post information about another person on social media, think about whether it is appropriate to share that information. If the information could allow a service user to be identified, you must not put it on a site without their permission. This information could include details about their personal life, health or circumstances, or images relating to their 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 you use. If you are unsure whether to post something, stop and get advice first from an experienced colleague, professional body or trade union.

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 by any other method. You must always communicate with service users in a professional way.

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 with your employer whether this is appropriate.

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

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.

Section 3:

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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