

# SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDELINE

(Based on CPSO Media Policy)



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## INTRODUCTION

The term 'social media' refers to web and mobile technologies and practices that people use to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives online. There are many prominent examples of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and blogging sites, among many others. Social media can be used for both personal and professional purposes. Dentists are now using social media in their practices to interact with colleagues and patients, to seek out dental and medical information online, and to share content with a broad audience. Whether engaging in social media for personal or professional use, the nature of these platforms, which are highly accessible, informal, and public, raise important questions about the steps dentists should take to uphold their important professional obligations while online.

## PURPOSE

This document provides guidance to dentists about how to engage in social media while continuing to meet relevant legal and professional obligations. This document is not a policy, nor does it establish any new expectations for dentists that are unique to social media. Rather, this document clarifies how existing professional expectations can be met in the social media sphere.

## COLLEGE POSITION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The College's position is that dentists are expected to comply with all their existing professional expectations, including those set out in relevant legislation codes of ethics and College policies, when engaging in the use of social media platforms and technologies. If dentists do so, the College recognizes that social media platforms may present important opportunities to enhance patient care, education, professional competence, and collegiality, among other potential benefits. Legal and professional expectations that govern dental practices are set out in the College's legislation, bylaws, and standards. A number of these obligations are relevant to the use of social media by dentists and are articulated below. These obligations are not unique to social media, but apply to dental practice in general, and must be met by all dentists.

They are as follows:

- Comply with all legal and professional obligations to maintain patient privacy and confidentiality.
- Maintain appropriate professional boundaries with patients and those close to them.
- Maintain professional and respectful relationships with patients, colleagues, and other members of the health-care team.
- Comply with relevant legislation and standards.
- Comply with the CDSS advertising standards.
- Comply with the law related to defamation, copyright, and plagiarism when posting content online.

## GUIDELINES

In order to satisfy the above professional expectations while engaging in social media, it is recommended that dentists:

1. Assume that all content on the internet is public and accessible to all.
2. Exercise caution when posting information online that relates to an actual patient to ensure compliance with legal and professional obligations and to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Bear in mind that an unnamed patient may still be identified through a range of other information, such as a description of their clinical condition or area of residence. A breach of confidentiality may be deemed to have occurred if the facts available are sufficient for the patient to be identified, even if only by themselves.
3. Refrain from providing clinical advice to specific patients through social media. It is acceptable, however, to use social media to disseminate generic dental or health information for educational or information sharing purposes. Clinical advice is defined as advice of a clinical nature that is directed toward a specific individual to address a medical concern. It is distinct from general health information that is not patient specific but disseminated to a general audience for education or information sharing purposes.
4. Protect their own reputation, the reputation of the profession, and the public trust by not posting content that could be viewed as unprofessional.
5. Be mindful of their internet presence and be proactive in removing content posted by themselves or others which may be viewed as unprofessional. Be mindful that once information has been posted online, it may be difficult or impossible to remove. Reasonable steps should be taken to remove information that has been posted by oneself or others.
6. Refrain from establishing personal connections with patients or persons closely associated with them online, as this may not allow dentists to maintain appropriate

professional boundaries and may compromise objectivity. It is acceptable to create an online connection with patients for professional purposes only. Some dentists may find it preferable to maintain a separate online presence for their personal and professional networks. For more information on maintaining appropriate professional boundaries, please see the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario's Maintaining Professional Boundaries and Preventing Sexual Abuse Policy, Treating Self and Family Members Policy, and dialogue article "Maintaining Boundaries".

7. Refrain from seeking out patient information that may be available online without prior consent. Patients are entitled to a reasonable expectation of privacy. While dentists are expected to adhere to all their relevant legal obligations under the Health Information Protection Act with respect to the collection of personal health information, they should also refrain from seeking out other types of non-protected information online without prior consent.
8. Read, understand, and apply the strictest privacy settings necessary to maintain control over access to their personal information, and social media presence undertaken for personal purposes only.
9. Remember that social media platforms are constantly evolving and be proactive in considering how professional expectations apply in any given set of circumstances.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The College acknowledges that this statement has been adapted, in some parts with no changes, from the respective statements of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario.

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