Supporting the appropriate use of social media

This month's Spotlight focuses on the appropriate use of social media for healthcare professionals with the following extract from *Standards and Recommendations for Safe Perioperative Practice* (Fifth Edition), published by The Association for Perioperative Practice.

STANDARD

There is a system in place to support the appropriate use of social media.

Increasingly the use of multiple social media platforms, contribute to a significant role in our lives. Social media has been defined as the development and use of mobile and web-based technology supporting highly interactive platforms for digital communications (Power 2014). It has the potential for both individuals and organisations to communicate effectively and immediately with a large number of people at any one time (Peate 2013, Wylie 2014).

Practitioners should also be clear that the term 'social media' relates to the infrastructure supporting this type of communication and that terms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and others should be recognised as the brand names of companies facilitating instant communication using the social media technology (Peate 2013).

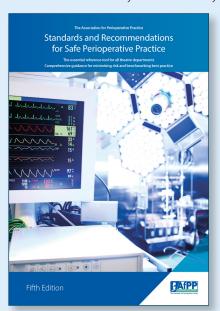The benefits of using social media have been defined as follows:

• Building and maintaining professional relationships

• Establishing or accessing nursing and midwifery support networks and being able to discuss specific issues, interests, research and clinical experiences with other healthcare professionals globally, and

• Being able to access resources for continuing professional development (NMC 2015, p2).

There has been some discussion in the literature as to the appropriateness of the use of social media sites by healthcare professionals and, in some instances, practitioners have been discouraged from using them (Wylie 2014).

What is clear is that there are concerns about the use of social media by healthcare practitioners, and perioperative practitioners are no exception to these concerns. Some of these concerns are as follows:

• Do entries (such as comments, photographs and status) on social media sites by practitioners meet the employer, legal and professional responsibilities in relation to confidentiality?

• Are users aware of employer policies relating to the use of social media?

• How secure are the settings on the account – no matter how high, there can still be problems if 'friends' access information that is considered to be inappropriate?

• Are practitioners aware that the information posted is in the public domain and cannot be completely deleted and removed, even if it appears that it can be?

• Are practitioners assuming that their comments can be deemed to be private? Because this is not the case (Azizi 2013).

It is recognised that many student and registered practitioners are using social media sites for educational purposes and that many universities and professional bodies and/or regulators are also using these sites in order to communicate effectively. This can be a very

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effective use of this technology that benefits everyone, provided it is used appropriately. Similarly, professional social media platforms such as LinkedIn, can also be beneficial to practitioners in building professional networks.

It is recognised that sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube and others can be used for both personal and professional purposes. Such usage can be very beneficial provided that all entries are appropriate.

However, a major criticism of these sites is that thoughts can be published within seconds, and thus the opportunity for reflection is lost. Once posted, the information is in the public domain (Wylie 2014).

Professional responsibility

The current HCPC *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics* (2016, p6) contain the following guidance in relation to the usage of social media.

Social media and networking websites

2.7 You must use all forms of communication appropriately and responsibly, including social media and networking websites.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC 2018, p19) has produced the following guidance for registrants as follows:

20 Uphold the reputation of your profession at all times

20.10 Use all forms of spoken, written and digital communication (including social media and networking sites) responsibly, respecting the right to privacy of others at all times.

Readers are strongly recommended to check for current guidance when reading the above standards.

In addition, the NMC has published specific guidance on using social media responsibly, which is intended to highlight safe principles for practice when using this communication medium. However, the guidance does provide examples of how registrants and student nurses and midwives may jeopardise their current or future registration and right to practice, if it is found that unlawful or unprofessional use of social media can be attributed to them.

The guidance includes but is not limited to the following:

- Sharing confidential information inappropriately

- Posting pictures of patients and people receiving care without their consent

- Posting inappropriate comments about patients

- Bullying, intimidating or exploiting people

- Building or pursuing relationships with patients or service users

- Stealing personal information or using someone else's identity

- Encouraging violence or self-harm; and

- Inciting hatred or discrimination (NMC 2015, p3).

Practitioners who are registered with the NMC should consider this guidance in conjunction with the requirements of the NMC Code to prioritise people, practice effectively, preserve safety, and promote professionalism and trust.

The NMC (2015, p6) also suggests the following:

Be informed
Make sure that you familiarize yourself with how individual social media applications work and be clear about the advantages and disadvantages.

Think before you post
It is important to realise that even the strictest privacy settings have limitations. This is because, once something is online, it can be copied and distributed.

Protect your professionalism and your reputation
If you are unsure whether something you post online could compromise your professionalism or your reputation, you should think about what the information means for you in practice and how it is affected by your responsibility to keep to the code.

It is important to consider who and what you associate with on social media. For example, acknowledging someone else's post can imply that you endorse or support their point of view. You should consider the possibility of other people mentioning you in inappropriate posts. If you have used social media for a number of years, it is important to consider, in relation to the Code, what you have posted online in the past.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL POLICY

1.14.1 Practitioners are aware of and adhere to current professional guidance in relation to the safe use of social media and networking sites.

1.14.2 Practitioners take time to consider the appropriateness of information they may post on a social media or networking site, including any comments to other posts that they may make.

1.14.3 Practitioners are aware of guidance and the policy provided by their employer in relation to the use of social media and networking sites.

1.14.4 Practitioners are clear and specific about the boundaries between personal and professional use of social media and networking sites.

1.14.5 Practitioners ensure that there is no breach of confidentiality in relation to the information they post on social media or networking sites.

1.14.6 Practitioners are aware of their employer's legal and professional duties in relation to confidentiality and of the potential consequences if these are breached.

1.14.7 Registrants are aware of the potential repercussions on their practice and/or their professional registration in the event that their use of social media and networking sites is questioned by their employer and/or professional regulator.

References and further reading

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