Social Media and e-Professionalism

Guidelines for Nurses

March 2021

Developed in collaboration with:
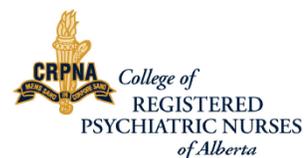
Approved by the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) Council, March 2021.

CARNA is operating as the College of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CRNA).

This document was developed collaboratively by the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta, the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta, and the College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Alberta.

Members of the above regulatory bodies should contact their respective organizations if they have any questions about this document or wish to seek practice guidance about this topic.

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In Alberta, the three regulatory bodies for the nursing professions are the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA), the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta (CLPNA), and the College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Alberta (CRPNA). The colleges define and interpret the scopes of practice for their regulated members, approve nursing education programs, establish or adopt codes of ethics and standards of practice, establish continuing competence programs, issue initial and renew practice permits for those individuals who meet legislated requirements, and intervene when a regulated member's practice does not meet the standards.

Nurses must be aware of social media's evolving culture, understand ever-changing technology, and have the skills and judgment to use it appropriately (International Nurse Regulator Collaborative, 2014)[1].

"E-Professionalism is defined as the attitudes and behaviors that reflect traditional professionalism paradigms but are manifested through digital media" (Kaczmarczyk et al, 2013)[2]. E-Professionalism incorporates the use of social media such as websites, applications, and networking platforms that enable users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, email, etc., are commonly used. Although the intent of social media use is to be positive, there have been unintended negative consequences. As regulated health professionals, nurses need to understand their professional and ethical obligation to protect the public and maintain conduct that reflects trustworthiness and integrity, including their online presence.

It is important to understand that inappropriate and unprofessional use of social media may lead to findings of unprofessional conduct resulting in disciplinary action. A nursing regulatory body may deem any activity on social media to be unprofessional if it harms the integrity of the client, person, employer, another health professional, colleague, or organization.

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[1] International Nurse Regulator Collaborative. (2014). *Social media use: Common expectations for nurses*. Retrieved 6 September 2019 from https://www.inrc.com/INRC_Social_Media_Use.pdf

[2] Kaczmarczyk, J. M., Chuang, A., Dugoff, L., Abbott, J. F., Cullimore, A. J., Dalrymple, J., & Casey, P. M. (2013). E-Professionalism: A new frontier in medical education. *Teaching & Learning in Medicine*, 25(2), 165–170.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines that support critical thinking and decision-making in the responsible use of social media. It is not intended to cover every social media and social networking situation. The information contained in this document supports nurses in understanding the importance of maintaining professionalism and making informed decisions when considering the use of any electronic form of communication.

Guideline 1
Nurses understand their professional and ethical obligation to protect the public and maintain conduct that reflects trustworthiness and that does not harm the integrity of a client, person, employer, another health professional, colleague, or organization, including their online presence.

Guideline 2
Nurses follow relevant legislation, standards, policy, and employer requirements when using social media and other electronic forms of communication.

Patient free and client free

Social media is a way to maintain contact and receive updates from people in our personal lives, and a way to reconnect with those we have lost track of over the years. However, clients or former clients can also track down staff and send "friend" requests as they may feel they "know" the nurse. Nurses should not accept "friend" or "follow" requests from clients. Nurses should review their professional boundary guidelines when considering friend requests from former clients.

Guideline 3
Nurses maintain professional boundaries in the use of electronic communication and social media.

A nurse's personal social media activity should have the most secure privacy settings, and they should consider the risk of using notable identifiers as to professional

designation or place of employment as nursing is a trusted and respected profession (Reinhart, 2020)[3].

A nurse's personal social media site should:

■ be client free;

■ not breach the privacy or confidentiality of a client or any facility policy; and

■ consider the risk and impact of making derogatory comments against a client, person, employer, another health professional, colleague, or organization that could be perceived as negative and harmful.

Any online posts, likes, messages, etc., can be saved as a screen shot, reposted, printed, sent to an employer, and be understood as public domain. It is important for nurses to develop their social media competence and to understand that personal privacy settings may not ensure their privacy.

Inappropriate use of social media may jeopardize the nurse's ability to preserve the trust and respect required for a therapeutic relationship. Remember that clients are any individual whom a nurse provides a service to within the four domains of nursing[4].

Professional – Act professional

Nursing is a trusted and respected profession and nurses are held to a standard of professional accountability and responsibility. As a regulated health professional, nurses are expected to maintain professionalism, including when using social media. Nurses must follow relevant legislation, standards and codes of ethics, policies, and employer requirements using social media and other electronic forms of communication. The Canadian Nurses Protective Society (2012)[5] states that ''failure to abide by these [professional standards] can lead to serious legal consequences''. Inappropriate use of

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[3] Reinhart, R. J. (2020). Nurses continue to rate highest in honesty, ethics. *Gallup*. Retrieved 11 February 2020 from https://news.gallup.com/poll/274673/nurses-continue-rate-highest-honesty-ethics.aspx

[4] The four domains of nursing are: clinical practice, administration, education, and research.

[5] Canadian Nurses Protective Society. (2012). *Social Media* [ebook]. https://www.cnps.ca/upload-files/pdf_english/social_media.pdf

social media can compromise public safety and trust in the nursing professions and may result in allegations of unprofessional conduct.

> **Guideline 4**
> Nurses maintain professionalism when using social media.

Maintaining professionalism becomes even more important when online communications indicate the person posting is a nurse. Nurses should:

- think before using a professional title or initials or making reference to being a nurse when presenting personal views, including those unrelated to the profession or those that could affect the public's trust in the profession;

- remember to credit the thoughts and work of others;

- not post content on behalf of an employer unless they are authorized to do so and are following all applicable employer requirements; and

- consider using a disclaimer stating the posts are a personal opinion and do not represent those of the profession or an employer.

Know and follow employer requirements regarding the use of social media and technology when at work. Spending time online for personal reasons at work could be viewed as client abandonment. Being distracted by notifications can affect work efficiency, productivity, and memory. Notifications can be visual, haptic, or auditory.

> **Guideline 5**
> Nurses follow employer requirements regarding the use of social media in their practice setting.

As a professional, employers, clients and the public rely on a nurse's expertise to provide accurate information. Any health information communicated through social media should always be evidence-informed. When a professional includes hyperlinks to other information and resources (e.g., websites, videos, podcasts, etc.), all information should be current, accurate, and reliable. When providing health advice online, through a professional capacity, ensure it is within your scope of practice to do so.

> **Guideline 6**
> Nurses ensure any posts and comments they make regarding health information is evidence-informed.

The standards and code of ethics for each nursing regulatory college outline the expectation to report behavior that is unethical or incompetent. When nurses notice a colleague or another health care professional has posted inappropriate or unprofessional content on social media platforms, they must report it to the appropriate person, organization, or regulatory authority. When nurses have a concern about care they or a loved one have received, or have a workplace issue, they should consider the most appropriate method or channel to address the concern.

Communities of practice

"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2011)[6]. Communities of practice (CoP) often use social media as a means of communication and discussion. CoP's contribute to attaining a greater depth and breadth of knowledge that benefits practice. Social media platforms often provide the opportunity to engage in a CoP, which allows the community to be dynamic and provide an ongoing, searchable conversation. The CoP must be a place where individuals feel safe to ask and answer questions and engage in discussion. When considering the use of social media for a CoP:

■ clarify the purpose for using social media,

■ assign an administrator to moderate posts, and

■ apply the rules of engagement of professional best practice for social media use e.g. the 6 P's (see below).

Privacy – Professional and personal boundaries

As health-care professionals, nurses are responsible for safeguarding a client's privacy and confidentiality. Posting identifiable information, location, or a picture, even with a

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[6] Wenger-Trayner, E. & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2011). *What is a community of practice*? Retrieved 6 September 2019 from https://wenger-trayner.com/resources/what-is-a-community-of-practice/

client's permission, can be viewed as a breach of privacy or confidentiality. Client information must only be collected, used, and disclosed through channels aligned with privacy legislation, professional practice standards, and employer requirements.

> **Guideline 7**
> Nurses protect the privacy and confidentiality of their clients when using social media and electronic communication.

Nurses should keep personal accounts separate and secure, and always think about how the details of what they are posting or "responding to" may be viewed by others. Nurses should always respect professional and personal boundaries, remember the information posted is generally considered permanent and cannot easily be deleted, and that copies of deleted information may still exist on search engines or other's electronic files. Engaging in interactions with clients via social media risks blurring the line between health-care provider and friend.

If a nurse uses social media websites or networking sites such as CoP for their professional development, it is important to remember that professional practice standards regarding confidentiality, therapeutic boundaries, and professionalism may be called into question. There are risks associated with social media use including the scope of distribution that, as a professional, one has no control over, such as what is downloaded, forwarded, archived, or distributed by others.

Permission – Confidentiality

Social media and social networking are a means to connect professionally with organizations and colleagues. Staying professional on these sites is an individual's responsibility. Strive for clear, professional, and audience-appropriate communication.

> **Guideline 8**
> Nurses provide evidence-informed health information to clients through professional social media accounts or an employer approved platform and only to those with whom they have a nurse-client therapeutic relationship.

Clients may use popular online discussion forums and website resources to acquire health information. Clients may be seeking health-related advice from a nurse as a health-care professional; however, it is important to not engage in these types of discussions even if a client grants permission. Clients are not bound by the same rules to uphold privacy and confidentiality. If social media is used within an employment setting (e.g. appointment confirmation or medication reminders), nurses need to follow the applicable employer requirements.

Pause and be positive

A nurse must think before posting and consider if the information being posted is information that colleagues, clients, employers, and the public should see. Nurses need to be mindful of potential breaches of privacy and confidentiality and never engage in illegal online activity, and consider the risk and impact of sharing, posting, or commenting on negative, disparaging, or demeaning material.

> **Guideline 9**
> Nurses are responsible to use their professional judgment with respect to their online presence and avoid posts or comments that could be considered negative, disparaging, or demeaning.

Nurses must be informed that everything posted on social media is retrievable and can be shared, re-posted, or captured as a screen shot. It is important nurses are aware that making comments on social media has the potential for being as public as if they were made in a public forum or to the media. Nurses are responsible for their online presence and the content of their online communications, so should:

■ maintain a positive, civil, and respectful online presence;

■ remember etiquette is just as important as it is for in-person conversations;

- avoid posting on social media in haste or anger; and consider the risk of negative, disparaging, or demeaning comments related to clients, colleagues, employers, or organization;

- never post or share confidential information that may be identifiable; and

- be aware of and follow employer policies related to the use of technology and social media in and outside the workplace.

A nurse's social media accounts may be interpreted as a reflection of both their personal and professional lives. Nurses must use professional judgment and show respect for the opinions of others on the various sites, apps, or platforms used, including posts liked, shared or commented on, and before joining any online groups that could be considered controversial.

Protection – Benefits and risks

Nurses should develop social media competence by knowing the risks and benefits of social media use. They should use social media after attaining the knowledge, skill, and judgement to use it appropriately, professionally, and ethically. Nurses should:

- be cautious about the amount of personal information shared online including personal views, values and beliefs;

- not give health advice online - giving health advice could be viewed as establishing a nurse-client relationship;

- avoid being inadvertently drawn into someone else's inappropriate behavior;

- review and remove outdated or inappropriate content posted on social media when reasonably possible;

- limit the use of hashtags and tagging which increases audience reach;

- regularly revisit privacy settings;

- use a difficult password, change it often, and log out when not using the site, especially when sharing devices; and

- keep social media sites used for professional purposes separate from personal ones.

Nothing can truly be removed completely from social media

Guideline 10
Nurses are competent in the use of social media and understand the risks and benefits of its use.

Summary

While social media use provides opportunities for nurses to connect with others, both on a personal and professional level, nurses must also understand the risks that are associated with it. Understanding and applying the guidelines while using social media will help nurses maintain social media competence and professionalism.

The 6 "Ps" Principles of Social Media E-Professionalism:

Professional — Act professionally at all times

Positive — Keep posts positive

Patient/person-free — Keep posts patient or person free

Protect yourself — Protect your professionalism, your reputation and yourself

Privacy — Keep your personal and professional life separate; respect privacy of others

Pause before you post — Consider implications; avoid posting in haste or anger

(INRC, 2014)