

The Health and Care Professions Council

Guidance on social media

Information for registrants

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Introduction

About this document

We have written this document to provide guidance to registrants who use social media. Registrants must meet our standards when using social media. In this guidance we explain more about how they can do this when using professional and personal accounts. When registrants use their personal accounts, they should be mindful of the impact their posts may have on their professional practice and their profession.

Social media is an important way for registrants to express their opinions and beliefs and to share information. Our standards and this guidance respect and uphold registrants' right to freedom of expression. This right, which is set out in Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights, is not an absolute right, and can be restricted in certain circumstances. You can find out more information about freedom of expression

at the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) website¹.

This document cannot deal with every issue that might come up. The examples and information provided will enable registrants and all HCPC stakeholders to build their understanding and use their professional judgement to identify the appropriate behaviour when registered professionals use social media.

This guidance is focused on our standards of conduct, performance and ethics. Some professional bodies publish social media guidelines to support their members to get the most from these platforms. 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.

¹ www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/human-rights-act/article-10-freedom-expression

- Section 1 provides guidance on how our standards relate to using social media and some relevant issues you may come across.
- Section 2 contains some top tips for using social media.
- Section 3 contains information about how to find out more.

Throughout the document, you may see sections like this. These text boxes provide extra definitions for some of the phrases we are using.

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 media-sharing websites and applications, and networking 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, media-sharing applications such as Instagram and TikTok and networking applications such as WhatsApp, as well as online forums and blogs.

About us

We are the Health and Care Professions Council. Our statutory role is to protect the public by regulating healthcare professionals in the UK. To do this, we keep a register of professionals who are required to meet our standards for their professional skills, knowledge and behaviour. Individuals on our Register are called ‘registrants’. We currently regulate 15 professions; you

can find out which professions we regulate on our website².

We promote high quality professional practice, regulating over 300,000 registrants by:

- setting standards for professionals' education and training and practice;
- approving education programmes which professionals must complete to register with us;
- keeping a register of professionals, who meet our standards;
- taking action if professionals on our Register do not meet our standards; and
- stopping unregistered practitioners from using protected professional titles.

² www.hcpc-uk.org/about-us/who-we-regulate/the-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:

- to help us to make decisions about the character of professionals who apply to our Register;
- if someone raises a concern about a registrant's practice; and
- when things go wrong: they help us to decide whether it is necessary to act.

As a registrant, you must make sure you are familiar with the standards and that you continue to meet them.

The current standards of conduct performance and ethics can be found on the HCPC website³.

³ www.hcpc-uk.org/standards/standards-of-conduct-performance-and-ethics

Section 1: Using social media

Benefits of social media

Registrants have told us that when using social media in a professional capacity, they are able to:

- 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.

When using social media in a personal capacity, we have heard from registrants that social media is a helpful way to:

- connect with friends and family;
- share their personal views and opinions with other individuals; and
- gain a better understanding of the world around them.

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 they always meet our standards.

The standards and social media

This guidance explains how to meet our standards when using social media in a professional and/or personal capacity. We have set out the guidance below under the areas of our standards which apply to the appropriate use of social media.

You should note that historic social media activity may be considered against our standards, even if you were not a registered professional at the time of that social media activity. It is important that you consider whether any historic social media activity may call into question your compliance with the standards considering the guidance below. If it might, you should take action (for

instance, by removing historic social media posts or deleting accounts).

Challenge discrimination

The standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

1.6 You must take action to ensure that your personal values, biases and beliefs do not lead you to discriminate against service users, carers or colleagues. Your personal values, biases and beliefs must not detrimentally impact the care, treatment or other services that you provide.

Our guidance:

Your services must be available to all service users and/or their carers. When you share content on social media you must do so in a way that does not hinder people's access to your services. This means that you should be aware of the impact that your personal views, biases and beliefs may have on people's access to your services.

This applies whether you are using a personal or professional social media account.

Maintain appropriate boundaries

The standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

1.9 You must take action to set and maintain appropriate professional boundaries with service users and/or carers and colleagues.

1.10 You must use appropriate methods of communication to provide care and other services related to your practice.

1.11 You must ensure that existing personal relationships do not impact professional decisions.

1.12 You must not abuse your position as a health and care practitioner to pursue personal, sexual, emotional or financial relationships with service users and/or carers or colleagues.

Our guidance:

Social media can blur the boundaries between your personal and professional life. It is just as important to maintain appropriate professional 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 professional

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 the impact of the content that you will share on these different audiences when they see the material you post. Think carefully about what you share and who can see it.

Bear in mind the personal material you intend to share only with friends or family on a personal account could be accessible to a much wider audience, and once uploaded, it may not be possible to delete it or control how widely it is shared.

What are professional boundaries?

Professional boundaries are there to keep service users and registrants safe. They set out the rules around how registrants and service users interact to keep their relationship only about the health and care of a service user.

Communicate appropriately

The standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

2.10 You must use media-sharing networks and social networking sites responsibly.

Our guidance:

When using social media, you should apply the same standards as you would when communicating in other ways. You must always be polite and respectful to others when communicating in a professional capacity.

2.11 You must make reasonable checks to ensure information is accurate, true, does not mislead the public and is in line with your duty to promote public health when sharing information on media sharing networks and social networking sites.

Our guidance:

When using social media, think about the accuracy and truth of the content that you share or circulate. Check that the information originates from people and/or organisations that are trustworthy. When engaging in online debate, ensure that your views are evidenced based, and that they are accurate to the best of your knowledge. Correct yourself if you have shared false, inaccurate, or misleading information.

What is misinformation?

Misinformation refers to inaccurate or false information shared online without the intention to cause harm. For example, inaccurate photos, dates or news reports.

2.12 You must use media sharing networks and social networking sites appropriately and responsibly, maintaining professional boundaries at all times and protecting service user/carer privacy.

Our guidance:

You must also be careful that the information you share on social media does not reveal personal information about service users and/or their carers. 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.

Respect confidentiality

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

5.1 You must treat information about service users as confidential.

Our guidance:

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. This applies whether you are sharing information to your personal connections or to the public.

Be honest and trustworthy

The standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

9.1 You must make sure that your conduct justifies the public's trust and confidence in you and your profession.

Our guidance:

This means you need to think carefully about what you share online. Throughout your use of social media make sure that what you share does not bring your professional practice or your profession into disrepute. When using either a professional or personal account, your conduct should continue to respect service users, their carers and/or your colleagues and maintain fair access to services for all.

9.3 You must make take reasonable steps to make sure that any promotional activities you are involved in are accurate and are not likely to mislead.

Our guidance:

If you use social media to advertise or share information related to your professional practice, you must make sure it is accurate and true, by making reasonable checks to verify it. 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.

What are reasonable checks?

Reasonable checks are steps that you can take to check that information is accurate and true. This includes checking sources of information, checking dates and assessing information against your professional knowledge.

Section 2: Top tips

Benefits of social media

You are required to meet the HCPC standards when communicating on social media and networking sites (standards 2.10-2.12). The following are some top tips for doing so.

- **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.
- Make **reasonable checks to ensure that information is true and accurate**. You should be aware of government public health messaging and ensure that any views you express about it are evidenced-based, responsible and professional.
- Think carefully about **which links you post and who you associate with, acknowledge or endorse/support online**.

- Maintain **appropriate professional boundaries** if you communicate with colleagues, service users or carers on social media.
- Do not post information which could identify a **service user and/or their carer.**
- If you are employed, **follow your employer’s social media policy.**
- Do not post **discriminatory or offensive material.**
- Use **your professional judgement** in deciding whether to post or share something.
- When in doubt, **get advice.** Appropriate sources might include experienced colleagues, trade unions and professional bodies. If you think something could be inappropriate or offensive, do not post it. You can also contact us for further information.
- **Remember that the professional standards expected of you do not change just because you are communicating on social media.**

- **Keep on posting!** We know that many registrants find using social media beneficial and do so without any issues.

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:

The Health and Care Professions Council
Park House
184-186 Kennington Park Road
London SE11 4BU

Phone: +44 (0)300 500 6184

Email: policy@hcpc-uk.org

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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