

## Chapter 14

### Social Media and Electronic Practice

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#### Social Media and Social Networking: Working Definitions

*Social media* includes the websites and applications enabling users to create and share content or to participate in social networking. *Social networking* is the use of these dedicated websites and applications to interact with other users, or to find and/or connect with people with similar interests to one's own (1). The use of online social media including networking forums and other electronic communication methods (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, email, blogs etc) have become increasingly common and sought after

tools to facilitate relationship building, networking, collaborating, communicating and sharing and gathering of information.

Social media technologies have grown from a way to connect with friends and family into a vital tool for helping businesses and professionals thrive. As the use and functionality of social media technologies in particular continues to evolve, they offer the opportunity to influence Dietetic practice and therefore the health and safety of the population. Combining these technologies with professional practice can improve the quality and timeliness of client care, improve access to accurate nutrition messages or expertise, and can improve the quality of nutrition information made available to clients and the public. The challenge with use of online social media can occur when the lines between professional and the personal, the private and the public, become blurred.

## **Social and Electronic Media: Uses in Practice**

Social and electronic media is being used for a variety of personal purposes, and is becoming increasingly more common for use by health professionals in their practices. Clients and the general public use social media to access health information and to locate professionals who can assist them in improving their health. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists and other regulated health professionals are using this media to share timely and accurate, evidence-based information with the general public and/or specific clients, to raise awareness on particular topics, to promote their practice and/or expertise, to collaborate with other health professionals, for recruitment purposes, and to organize events, among many other potential uses. The types of social media and their relative uses are constantly evolving as a result of ongoing technological developments; the following is a non-exhaustive list of examples of social and electronic media that Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists may come cross and/or use in their practices:

### ***Social Networking Sites***

Social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn are popular sites for personal and professional networking, respectively. These sites allow users to create online communities where individuals can meet and interact. These sites allow the opportunity to make lists of “friends” visible, allowing for connections between people who otherwise would not have had the opportunity. For example, Facebook is used by individuals and businesses alike, and Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists may use Facebook in their practices for advertising/marketing and sharing information with their networks. LinkedIn is a site for professionals looking to make professional connections, share or acquire information, to recruit or be recruited.

### ***Blogs***

Blogs are personal websites or web pages on which an individual or group of individuals records opinions, experiences, observations, links to other sites or images

on a regular basis. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists use blogs for sharing food and nutrition topics related to their practice.

### *Microblogging*

Most famously, Twitter allows social networks of users to send and read “tweets”, which are text messages limited to 140 characters. Registered users can read and post tweets in real time. Unregistered users have read-only functionality. Twitter also offers events, which can facilitate networking and dissemination and acquisition of information. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists using Twitter have the opportunity to send out concise pieces of information to many followers in real time, promote their business and make additional contacts.

### *Image Sharing*

Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest are just a few of the image sharing sites available where online photos and/or videos can be shared via social networks. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists may use these sites to post and share images of food, presentations, health messages, etc.

### *Video Sharing*

YouTube is presently the most popular video-sharing site available. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists and other regulated health professionals can both post videos for educational purposes (for clients, other health professionals, students etc), or view to learn from others’ experiences.

### *Apps*

According to the Oxford Dictionaries online, an “app”, or application is a “self-contained program or piece of software designed to fulfil a particular purpose; an application, especially as downloaded by a user to a mobile device” (1). Apps can be successfully used for sharing food, nutrition and health care information via personal computers and mobile devices.

### *Email*

Email, one of the original online communication methods, allows Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists to communicate with an individual or a group of individuals.

### *Tele and/or Video-Conferencing*

Interactions with clients or groups of clients can mimic telephone or face-to-face interactions via telecommunications technologies, often across the internet, in “real-time”. Audio and/or video (via webcam) calls can be made live, person to person via free or low cost apps such as Skype, Tango, FaceTime; other videolink software are

designed for video streaming between two or more groups of users, often for professional purposes.

These technologies allow Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists to communicate one on one or with groups of individuals, for assessment, teaching, and/or coaching purposes, reducing the need for travel. These tools open the door to cross-border client care, offering cost effective alternatives to face-to-face interactions (see Electronic Practice below).

## Principles for Professional Social Media Conduct

An emerging cause of unprofessional conduct across regulatory Colleges relates to the use of social media and/or use of online communication tools. In the age of electronic media, online networking, social media forums and the use of other electronic communication methods (as described above) have become common tools among the general public and health professionals alike. The downside to combining these technologies with professional practice and/or personal interactions is that the line between the professional and the personal can become blurred without careful attention.

Professional practice issues arising as a result of communication via social media sites in particular include, but are not limited to: professional image and integrity; trust in the profession; the duty to report; breach of confidentiality; protection of privacy; boundary crossings, among other ethical issues.

To minimize the inherent risks involved when the professional uses social media for personal and/or professional communication, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are encouraged to adhere to the principles outlined in the *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice* and the *Code of Ethics* of the College. As such, the following best practice is recommended, related to each of the following areas:

### ***Trust in the Profession and Professionalism:***

Professional integrity for Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are stated in the *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice*. The applicable essential competency and performance indicator statements are as follows:

#### **“1.0 Practices with professional integrity.**

- 1.1 Practices in compliance with professional legislation and regulations.  
*May include but is not limited to: health profession acts, protection for person in care acts, personal directive acts, health information protection acts, freedom of information and protection of privacy acts*
- 1.2 Practices in compliance with professional standards, practice guidelines and codes.

*May include but is not limited to: practice standards, codes of ethics, continuing competence programs*

- 1.3 Provides services within scope of practice and personal competence.
- 1.4 Refers individuals for consultation when issues are beyond scope of practice and competence.
- 1.5 Accepts personal responsibility and accountability for actions and decisions.”<sup>88</sup>

Professional obligations are reflected in Section 1.0: The dietitian protects the public as their primary professional obligation, of the *Code of Ethics* of the College which states the following:

### **“1.1 Primary Obligation**

- (1) The dietitian accepts the obligation as a regulated member of a College under the Health Professions Act to protect and serve the public interest.
- (2) As a regulated member of the College under the Health Professions Act, the dietitian respects the establishment, maintenance and enforcement of standards for registration, competence, standards of practice and a code of ethics for the regulated profession.

### **1.2 Trust in the Profession**

- (1) The dietitian maintains a level of personal and professional conduct that maintains the integrity and dignity of the profession and sustains the public’s confidence in the profession.
- (2) The dietitian uses the professional titles and initials protected by the College, when providing professional services to assist the public in identifying them as a regulated health professional.
- (3) The dietitian maintains public trust in the dietetic profession by bringing forward concerns about incompetent, unethical or unsafe practice by dietitians to the College.
- (4) The dietitian upholds their professional responsibility to the public by bringing forward concerns about the incompetent, unethical or unsafe practice by other health professionals to the appropriate regulatory body.
- (5) The dietitian addresses concerns about practice with the health professional first when appropriate in the circumstances and reports the concern to employers and others as appropriate in the circumstances.

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<sup>88</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice*; 2007.

- (6) The dietitian does not use professional titles and initials or make references to being a member of the dietetic profession or the College, or having dietetic education and training when:
- a. representing personal views, views that are unrelated to the practice of the profession, views that would affect public trust in the profession;
  - b. undertaking activities that are unrelated to the practice of the profession;
  - c. acting within a personal rather than professional role.”<sup>89</sup>

**What a professional can do to minimize risk in this area:**

- The dietitian’s primary obligation is to protect the public while practicing with professional integrity; therefore it is essential that the Registered Dietitian and Registered Nutritionist be mindful and self-aware whenever using social or any electronic media. Conduct that results in harm to a member of the public or the integrity of the profession may be deemed unprofessional conduct by the College.
- The dietitian must maintain separate personal and professional profiles, keeping in mind the principle that he or she is a professional “24/7”, even in personal communications.
- The dietitian must not use professional titles and initials or make references to being a member of the profession or College when representing personal views, particularly when unrelated to the profession, or views that would affect the public’s trust in the profession.
- When the professional does choose to identify him or herself as a dietitian, the dietitian should consider using a disclaimer when making personal posts, such as “The posts on this site are my own and do not necessarily represent the position, opinions and behaviour of Dietitians or the profession in general” (2).
- The dietitian must not post disparaging, demeaning or embarrassing information about clients, colleagues, supervisors, employers, educators, professors, mentors, students or a regulatory body (2).
- The dietitian must be aware of and take responsibility for his or her online persona. To the best of his or her ability, the dietitian must remove or edit content that may be viewed by clients, professionals or the public as unprofessional.

For more information on professionalism, unprofessional conduct, the risks and processes resulting from a complaint of unprofessional conduct, please refer to Chapter 6 on Professional Conduct.

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<sup>89</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Code of Ethics*; 2007.

### *The Duty to Report:*

Professional obligations are reflected in Section 1.0: The dietitian protects the public as their primary professional obligation, of the *Code of Ethics* of the College which states the following:

#### **“1.4 Duty to Report**

- (1) The dietitian reports to the College with respect to any actions they are subject to including: any legal actions and any actions taken by professional regulatory bodies or employers with respect to their practice and also reports the outcome of any action taken to the College.
- (2) The dietitian communicates confidential information to prevent harm if the dietitian becomes aware that an individual poses a serious risk of harm to themselves or others. The disclosure of information should be limited to individuals who reasonably need to know and to the extent necessary in the circumstances.
- (3) The dietitian must be familiar with the laws concerning the reporting of abuse of children and vulnerable adults and must comply with those laws.
- (4) The dietitian discloses adverse events and takes all necessary actions according to established guidelines to minimize harm arising from an adverse event and to prevent recurrence.
- (5) The dietitian takes appropriate precautions and follows established guidelines with respect to communicable or infectious diseases including hepatitis, AIDS, blood-borne infections, influenza.
- (6) If the dietitian believes they may have been in contact with an individual who has a communicable or infectious disease or has contracted a communicable or infectious disease that involves a risk to the health or safety of clients or the public, the dietitian discloses the information to the appropriate individuals (may include but is not limited to: the employer, the medical officer of health and the College) and takes all required precautions (may include but is not limited to: protective gear, testing, monitoring, isolation).
- (7) If the dietitian believes that institutional, facility or workplace policies, procedures or practices involve a risk to the health or safety of clients or the public, the dietitian discloses the information to the appropriate individuals (may include but is not limited to: the employer, the medical officer of health and the College) and takes all required precautions.”<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Code of Ethics*; 2007.

**What a professional can do to minimize risk in this area:**

- It is the dietitian's duty to report any type of unprofessional conduct by another regulated health professional including conduct via social media or in electronic practices, to the appropriate regulatory body.

For more information on duty to report, please refer to Chapter 8 on Confidentiality.

***Confidentiality:***

Confidentiality for Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists is stated in the *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice*. The applicable essential competency and performance indicator statements are as follows:

**“2.0 Respects the individuality and autonomy of others.**

- 2.1 Respects individuals and their rights regardless of race, religious beliefs, color, gender, physical and/or mental disability, marital status, family status, economic status, education level, age, ancestry or sexual orientation.
- 2.2 Respects the dignity and privacy of individuals.
- 2.3 Obtains informed consent as required prior to providing services.
- 2.4 Provides services considering the best interests of the individual and their needs.

**3.0 Applies legal and ethical principles in managing information.**

- 3.1 Complies with legislation and established policies in managing information.  
May include but is not limited to: freedom of information and protection of privacy acts, personal information protection acts, health information acts
- 3.2 Protects the confidentiality and security of information throughout collection, storage, use, dissemination and destruction processes.
- 3.3 Protects integrity, reliability and authenticity of records.

**4.0 Applies information management principles and current technology in practice.**

- 4.1 Documents and maintains information in compliance with established guidelines.

- 4.2 Maintains accurate, clear, concise and timely documentation of professional services.
- 4.3 Uses current technology in practice.  
May include but is not limited to: software, multimedia, web casts, e-mail, instant messaging, listservs, file transfers, videoconferencing, electronic charting.”<sup>91</sup>

Confidentiality is reflected in Section 2.0: The dietitian respects the autonomy and rights of the individual, of the *Code of Ethics* of the College which states the following:

### “2.3 Confidentiality

- (1) The dietitian respects the confidentiality of information obtained in providing professional services.
- (2) The dietitian discloses confidential information only when the client consents to disclosure, when disclosure is required or permitted by law, or when disclosure is necessary to protect the client or another individual from harm. See Duty to Report.
- (3) The dietitian avoids indiscreet or public conversations about the client or their treatment.
- (4) The dietitian does not access information in databases or records about individuals who are not clients or information that is not required to provide professional services.
- (5) The dietitian limits access to professional records by others to preserve confidentiality of information.”<sup>92</sup>

Professionals have an obligation to treat information confidentially. Sharing clients’, colleagues’, employers’, students’ or others’ personally identifying information and/or using undermining language via social media is a contravention of confidentiality and may constitute unprofessional conduct, as defined in the *Health Professions Act*.

The rules for use and disclosure of information are outlined in legislation (see Chapter 8 for details on information legislation including *PIPA*, *FOIP* and *HLA*). Sharing of others’ information either verbally or in writing, including on social networking or other online sites may constitute unprofessional conduct. Because professionals are held to a high degree of accountability to the public, such practices may lead to a complaint to the College, where the implications to the professional can be considerable (including but not limited to reprimands, fines, suspension or revocation of practice permit with the College).

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<sup>91</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice*; 2007.

<sup>92</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Code of Ethics*; 2007

In the case of *Naylor Publications Co. (Canada) v. Media Union of Manitoba, Local 191*, Arbitrator Naylor summarized the “reality of email and the internet is that privacy can never be guaranteed...the technology creates real limitations on the privacy and security of an email message.”<sup>93</sup>

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists are urged to use caution when using blogs, social networking or any form of electronic communication where purposeful communication of confidential, personally identifying information of a client may be possible.

**What a professional can do to minimize risk in this area:**

- The dietitian must respect and protect an individual’s right to privacy and respect the confidentiality of information obtained in providing professional services. Sharing others’ information may constitute unprofessional conduct.
- The dietitian must avoid indiscreet or public online conversations about the client or their treatment.
- The dietitian must not reveal personally identifying information of any client, including using a pseudonym. Even a few basic facts may be enough to identify a client to a family member or friend.
- The dietitian should familiarize him or herself with privacy settings, remembering that settings can change and are not a replacement for responsible, discreet communication practices. Although privacy settings can help dietitians manage what is viewed and by whom, the information may be available to others through a variety of means. Content intended for a limited audience may be disseminated beyond the dietitian’s control.
- The dietitian must assume all online content is public and accessible to anyone at any time.

For more information on protection, use and disclosure of information and confidentiality, please refer to Chapter 8 on Confidentiality.

***Professional Boundaries:***

Professional Boundaries are reflected in Section 2.0: The dietitian respects the autonomy and rights of the individual, of the *Code of Ethics* of the College which states the following:

**“2.4 Professional Boundaries**

- (1) The dietitian must respect boundaries that separate their personal and professional relationships and roles.
- (2) The dietitian is sensitive to their position of relative power or influence in professional relationships and does not use their position to take physical, emotional, sexual or financial advantage of clients.

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<sup>93</sup> Workwise: Current Employment and Labour Law Issues, FieldLaw, Issue #40, Summer 2010

- (3) The dietitian does not undertake a professional relationship when a current or previous personal, financial, employment or legal relationship with the client would compromise the provision of professional services or the integrity of the dietitian.
- (4) The dietitian does not engage in a sexual relationship with a client when a professional relationship exists.”<sup>94</sup>

Because professional – client or professional – student relationships are fiduciary, or trust, relationships where clients and students are generally in a more vulnerable position than the professional, a high degree of care is required on the part of the professional. All professionals are required to act in the best interests of their clients and students and to avoid promoting their own interests.

Regarding cases where professionals communicate on personal blogs or social networking sites using undermining or disparaging language against an employer, in *Re Government of Alberta and Alberta Union of Provincial Employees*, Arbitrator Ponak “held that despite the right (sic) to blog and to have opinions, there are nevertheless consequences to the employment relationship when such thoughts are publicly aired and will have consequences if they irreparably harm the employment relationship.”<sup>95</sup>

#### **What a professional can do to minimize risk in this area:**

- The dietitian must not initiate or accept requests for online contact with clients, former clients, clients’ family members nor students, unless it is for the purpose of direct client care. The dietitian must always be mindful of the professional – client relationship and professional boundaries.
- The dietitian should not share the details of his or her personal life on social media sites; clients, colleagues, employers and students may access this information, putting the dietitian in a potentially difficult situation.

For more information on professional boundaries, please refer to Chapter 12 on Professional Boundaries.

#### ***Communication:***

Although some Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists may be reluctant to utilize social media, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the definition of successful communication skills now includes the ability to navigate and utilize virtual spaces. Registered Dietitians should consider the benefits of learning how to use social media safely so as to avoid pitfalls resulting from lack of experience and/or knowledge of its safe use.

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<sup>94</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Code of Ethics*; 2007.

<sup>95</sup> FieldLaw, Issue #40, Summer 2010

Communication for Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists is stated in the *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice*. The applicable essential competency statements are as follows:

**“Standard 2: Communication**

**5.0 Communicates clearly and effectively.**

**6.0 Uses effective information gathering skills.**

**7.0 Provides education to meet the learning needs of individuals and groups.**

**8.0 Facilitates team work.**

**9.0 Uses effective counseling / coaching skills.”<sup>96</sup>**

**What a professional can do to minimize risk in this area:**

- Choose the best media for the best interaction/communication with the client, so as to ensure that any barriers to optimal communication are addressed (for example: phone, Skype, Facebook etc)
- Write clearly, concisely and professionally at all times, whether via personal or professional online spaces

For more information on communication, please refer to Chapter 13 Communication and Team Work.

**Electronic Practice: Working Definition**

Electronic practice is defined as the provision of dietetic service (e.g. counseling, providing information and advice) via internet, email, telephone, videoconference or other electronic means to the public and to individual clients/patients. Electronic dietetic practice refers to communication with clients or patients using these media across provincial, territorial or national borders (3).

Electronic dietetic practice in this context does not refer to communication and consultation between Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists or other health professionals across borders.

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<sup>96</sup> College of Dietitians of Alberta. *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice*; 2007.

### Benefits and Limitations of Electronic Practice (3)

#### Benefits:

- Services can be provided in a more timely manner
- Services can be delivered at a lower cost to the client
- Improved access to services (not limited by geographic location)
- Professionals can improve the quality of the services they deliver (e.g. less time spent on travel therefore more time to participate in continuing education or research)
- More efficient use of time for dietitian (e.g. less time to travel) Improved access to follow up care; continuity of care

#### Limitations:

- Effectiveness of communication i.e. Lack of face-to-face contact between practitioner and client may reduce or be perceived as reducing quality of care
- Limited availability of assessment information
- Potential for breach of confidentiality and communication failure
- Potential for unauthorized practice
- Potential for providers to practice outside of their scope of practice
- Potential for telepractice to be favored for cost savings when direct contact may be more appropriate Limited ability of regulators to effectively enforce professional standards and obligations due to difficulty of a regulatory body conducting investigations in other jurisdictions.

### Lawful Practice and Legal Jurisdiction (3)

Laws vary from province to province with regard to electronic practice across provincial borders. Each jurisdiction has the discretion to require Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists to register in the province where the client resides. Provincial regulatory bodies should advise Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists to comply with registration requirements and adhere to the scope of practice in the province(s) where the client resides.

#### *Registration Requirements*

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists practicing electronically across provincial borders must know every province's position with respect to whether registration is required in the province where the client resides. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must respect privacy legislation in both jurisdictions. Therefore, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists providing electronic service to clients outside of Alberta are required to contact the regulatory body in the jurisdiction the client resides to determine whether registration in that province is required.

When a Registered Dietitian engages in electronic dietetic practice with a client outside of the province where they are registered (Alberta), it is generally accepted that the Registered Dietitian is held accountable to the college where she/he is registered (CDA).

### Lawful Scope of Practice (3)

In electronic practice, Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must be aware of and comply with restricted activities (e.g. controlled practice activities, controlled acts, and scope of practice) and authorization practices in the province where the client resides, as well as the province where the Registered Dietitian resides.

1. If a province has a restricted activity, the Registered Dietitian must be registered in that province in order to perform the restricted activity.
2. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must only practice within the scope of practice for the province in which they are registered AND the scope of practice for the province in which the client resides.

### Principles of Client-Focused Electronic Practice (3)

#### *Accountability*

The public benefits from increased access to dietetic expertise through electronic dietetic practice. However, as public safety is the regulatory mandate, the public needs to know that their Registered Dietitian and Registered Nutritionist is registered and accountable through a provincial dietetic regulatory body. Registration with a regulatory body ensures that Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists have met specified qualifications to practice dietetics, that they practice in keeping with established professional standards, and that clients have a way to raise a concern and lodge a complaint. With few exceptions, current dietetic legislation and policy in Canadian jurisdictions do not address electronic dietetic practice, however it is generally accepted that a regulatory body has jurisdiction over the conduct of Registered Dietitians registered with them wherever the conduct occurs.

#### *Transparency*

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists providing or offering to provide services via electronic means across borders should inform clients of the jurisdiction where they are registered and limitations of e-practice. For example, the client needs to understand that complaints about the Registered Dietitians' conduct would have to be made to the regulatory body in the jurisdiction where the Registered Dietitian is registered, and not necessarily the jurisdiction in which the client resides.

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists should use the title *Registered Dietitian* or *Dietitian* to provide clarity to the public. Designations differ amongst provinces and the title *Dietitian* is consistent in all provinces and the use of other titles (e.g. nutritionist, nutrition consultant) may confuse their professional status.

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists should provide electronic information, including email and website addresses, blogs or any other interactive electronic address to the regulatory body where the Registered Dietitian is registered.

*Duty to Clients*

Communication with a client through electronic dietetic practice constitutes a dietitian-client relationship in the same way that any in-person interaction would constitute a dietitian-client relationship. The Registered Dietitian has a duty to provide care to clients in a manner consistent with care provided in person and to adapt the duty to the medium. For example, with regards to confidentiality, the Registered Dietitian would identify those who are able to observe the interaction (others in a room during a telephone call). The same professional obligations that exist for consent, confidentiality, and security of information in face-to-face dietetic services also exists for electronic dietetic services.

1. As part of obtaining informed consent when providing electronic dietetic service, the Registered Dietitian should clearly disclose limitations and risks of electronic dietetic practice (including risks associated with confidentiality), their name, registration status, jurisdiction(s) in which registration/license is held and contact information for their registering/licensing jurisdiction.
2. Competent services – Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists should be competent in the use of the technology used in their practice and address the limitations of technology in terms of care provided to their clients and security of client information.
3. Collaboration – Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists will refer clients to other health care professionals when a client's needs exceed the dietitian's professional abilities.
4. Professional Practice - Dietetic assessment, intervention and recommendations must be evidence-based or in accordance with best practice, and in accordance with the ethical and practice standards of the province where the Registered Dietitian is registered. Record keeping also needs to be in accordance with the ethical and practice standards of the province where the Registered Dietitian is registered. If the standards of practice of the profession cannot be met by services provided electronically, the Registered Dietitian must refer the client elsewhere. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must not attempt to exempt the services provided electronically from compliance with standards of practice and ethical behavior by obtaining releases or disclaimers from the client.
5. Many provincial dietetic regulatory bodies require Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists to carry professional liability insurance. It is advisable to carry professional liability insurance if engaging in electronic practice and to ensure that coverage includes such services.

As discussed in Chapter 10 Record Keeping, safeguards must be taken when consulting or communicating with clients via email. Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists must mitigate the risks associated with communicating with clients via email or other electronic means. Please refer to Chapter 10 for details.

## **Summary: How to Safely Practice Electronically Using Social and other Electronic Media**

The following are suggestions to assist Registered Dietitians and Registered Dietitians practice safely when using electronic tools and social media in professional practice:

### **Guidelines to Safeguard Against Unprofessional Conduct**

Registered Dietitians and Registered Nutritionists considering using social networking, blogs or other electronic communication tools for personal or professional use should use the following guidelines to safeguard themselves against unprofessional conduct:

1. Adopt a “think before you post” attitude. Assume that anything you say may be seen by clients\*, other professionals, employers, students, interns etc. NEVER post or discuss client specific information.
2. Always be mindful of your professional identity: what you say or post online personally could be tied to you as a professional and to your profession.
3. Do not post inappropriate pictures, video or statements on personal or public sites.
4. Do not use foul language.
5. Do not put anything on your profile that you would not display for your supervisor, colleagues, clients or students/interns at your work station.
6. Never betray the professional – client relationship. Contravention of confidentiality obligations may constitute unprofessional conduct as defined in the *HPA*.
7. Do not solicit or accept “friendships” with clients, their family members or with students/interns. Be mindful of appropriate professional – client boundaries.
8. Review your privacy settings regularly.
9. Ensure you are registered with the appropriate regulatory body if you are communicating with clients in another province/territory or internationally.

\*Client is defined as “an individual, family, substitute decision maker, group, agency, government, employer, employee, business, organization or community who is the direct or indirect recipient of the dietitian’s expertise”. This definition includes a student as the client of the Registered Dietitian or Registered Nutritionist.

## 8 Tips for Effective Social Media Communication (4)

Develop an online presence built on integrity so you can post, tweet, and blog nutrition messages and have a positive influence in the dietetics social media space:

1. **Show integrity.** Treat the statements you make online as if you're making them face to face.
2. **Remain authentic.** Always state who you are and who you represent when posting online.
3. **Stay civil.** If you disagree with a post, respectfully disagree while acknowledging different viewpoints, being considerate of diverse opinions.
4. **Take precautions.** Always safeguard personal information, and remember that once information is posted online it stays online.
5. **Show professionalism.** Always remain ethical, and keep professional and public lives separate. Be cognizant that behavior online affects the reputation of individuals, employers, and organizations as well as the profession as a whole.
6. **Keep information confidential.** It's not appropriate to divulge sensitive patient information or discuss clients in a way that violates their privacy.
7. **Value originality.** Posting trademarked or copyrighted content or intellectual property is never allowed. Give credit where credit is due by citing the source of your information and ideas.
8. **Scrutinize your online presence.** Monitor your virtual identity routinely to ensure your information is accurate and credible.

## Chapter Summary

Social Media and related electronic tools are increasingly being used by professionals and the public alike for sharing, accessing, and utilizing health information. Definitions and examples of social networking sites, blogs, microblogging, image and video sharing, apps, email and tele-/video-conferencing are discussed. Principles for professional social media conduct focus on adhering to the *Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice* and the *Code of Ethics*, particularly in the areas related to Trust in the Profession, Duty to Report, Confidentiality, Professional Boundaries, and Communication. The benefits and limitations of electronic dietetic practice (defined as communication with clients or patients across provincial, territorial or national borders, via internet, email, telephone, videoconference or other electronic means) are reviewed. Registration requirements, accountability, transparency, and the duty to clients when practicing electronically are highlighted. The chapter concludes with Guidelines for Safeguarding against Unprofessional Conduct and Tips for Effective Social Media Communications.

## References

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