



COLLEGE OF DIETITIANS
OF ALBERTA

Social Media Practice Guidelines

Introduction

Online networking, social media forums and the use of other electronic communication methods (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, email etc) have become common tools to facilitate networking, collaborating, communicating and sharing information among the general public and health professionals alike. As the use and functionality of social media technologies in particular continues to evolve, they offer almost unlimited opportunity to influence Dietetic practice and therefore the health and safety of the population. The downside of combining these technologies with professional practice and/or personal interactions and communications is that the line between the professional and the personal (and the private and public) can become blurred.

Safety, privacy, and professional image can be compromised by publishing personal details such as phone numbers, addresses, birth dates, and/or photographs; posting comments and opinions; and/or joining controversial online groups. The lay press is replete with stories of individuals who have experienced legal, academic, and reputation problems due to ill-advised online information sharing.

As a regulated health professional, it is important to remember that you are a professional “24/7”.

As regulated health professionals, it is important to always

remember that we are professionals “24/7” and therefore the professional and ethical obligations laid out in the College of Dietitians of Alberta’s *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and Essential Competencies for Dietetic Practice* are relevant at all

times, despite what we may consider to be personal and private communication. Due to the nature of social media, most platforms cannot be expected to protect your privacy. To protect yourself as a professional, it is important to remember that information, opinions, and conversations posted on these forums must be considered public information.

To minimize the inherent risks involved when the professional uses social media for personal or professional communication, the following practice is recommended:

Your primary obligation is to protect the public while practicing with professional integrity.

Trust in the profession & professionalism

- Your primary obligation is to protect the public while practicing with professional integrity, therefore be mindful and self-aware whenever using social or any electronic media. Any conduct that harms the integrity of the profession may be deemed unprofessional conduct by the College.
- Maintain separate personal and professional profiles, keeping in mind that you are a professional “24/7” even in personal communications.
- Do 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.

- If you do identify yourself as a Dietitian, 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” (adapted from Physiotherapy Alberta, College & Association, 2012).

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- Do not post disparaging, demeaning or embarrassing information about clients, colleagues, supervisors, employers, educators, professors, mentors, students or a regulatory body (Physiotherapy Alberta, College & Association, 2012).
- Be aware and take responsibility for your online persona. To the best of your ability, remove or edit content that may be viewed by clients, professionals or the public as unprofessional.
- It is the duty of all regulated health professionals to report unprofessional social media or electronic conduct of another professional to the appropriate regulatory body.
- It is your duty to be aware of all employer policies on social media.

Confidentiality & Professional Boundaries:

- 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.
- Avoid indiscreet or public online conversations about the client or their treatment.
- Do not reveal personally identifying information of any client; using a pseudonym, or not using their name, does not make inappropriate content acceptable. Even a few basic facts may be enough to identify a client to a family member or friend.

- Familiarize yourself with privacy settings, however remember that settings can change and are not a replacement for responsible, discreet communication practices. Remember that although privacy settings can help you manage who sees what you write and to whom, the information may be available to others through a variety of means. Content intended for a limited audience may be disseminated beyond your control.
- Assume all online content is public and accessible to anyone. If you wouldn’t post something on the wall of your cubicle at work, do not post it anywhere online.
- Do not initiate or accept requests for online contact with clients, former clients, or students. Always be mindful of the professional – client relationship and professional boundaries.
- Do not share the details of your personal life on social media sites; clients, colleagues and employers may have access to this information, putting you in a potentially difficult situation.

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Remember that you are a professional at all times.

References:

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Practice Guideline: Use of Social Media. Physiotherapy Alberta College & Association, November 2012.

When private become public: The ethical challenges and opportunities of social media. Ethics in Practice for Registered Nurses. Professional Practice and Regulation division of the Canadian Nurses Association, February 2012.