



Revised: December 2023

## Introduction

Online networking, social media forums and the use of other digital communication methods (Facebook, X/Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, email, blogs, etc.) has expanded enormously in the last decade, and has quickly become an important method of communicating, networking, collaborating, sharing information as well as expressing opinions and debate (4).

The College of Dietitians of Alberta (CDA) recognizes that advocacy for the health of patients/clients and the public is an important part of the profession. Maintaining professionalism while protecting the public (and the image of the profession) from harm is an essential component of communicating with others. As health professionals RDs are held to a high standard, and therefore RDs maintain the credibility of the profession, through professional communication and practices.

CDA provides guidelines such as this to help minimize miscommunication that could put an individual RD or the profession at risk.

As regulated health professionals, it is important to always remember that you 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* are always relevant, despite what may be considered personal and private communication.

Although there are risks to engaging in social media, the risks can be mitigated with an intentional approach to social media use, which can have benefits for professionals, businesses, patients/clients, and the general public.

The very first step to take is to ensure that your **personal** social media usage is (3):

- Client free
- Free of client information; does not breach the privacy or confidentiality of any client or any facility policy
- Free from derogatory comments against clients, colleagues, employer, or practice setting

To minimize the risks when using social media personally or professionally, the following practices are recommended:

### 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 digital media. Any conduct that harms the integrity of the profession may be deemed unprofessional conduct by the College.



## Social Media Practice Guidelines

- Think about **what you want to accomplish** with your social media accounts as well as where your target audience is and what they value. Take care to consider **how you want to be perceived**, as social media and website content is often one of the first points of contact potential patients/clients will have with you.
- **Maintain separate personal and professional email and social media accounts** and profiles, keeping in mind that you are a professional “24/7” even in personal communications.
  - Don’t post things about your private life on your professional accounts (and don’t follow, “friend,” or communicate with patients from your personal accounts).
  - Be cautious about identifying your profession on your personal social media accounts—once you identify as a member of your profession, your online comments are interpreted in that light.
  - **Do not use professional titles and initials** or make references to being a regulated 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” (5).
- **Do not post disparaging, demeaning or embarrassing information about people** in general, but specifically about clients, colleagues, supervisors, employers, educators, professors, mentors, students, or a regulatory body (5).
- **Be mindful of the opinions you share** on both personal and professional social media accounts. **Your audience is everywhere**, and the nature of social media networks makes it very easy for anyone to weigh in on your post. Consider followers or “friends” (or critics) with opposite opinions to yours. The more controversial your content, the more likely you are to reach an unintended audience. Certain types of posts risk damaging the reputation of the professional and the profession. For this reason, on professional accounts, stick to your own scope of practice and knowledge base (1).
- **Maintain a professional tone** and address patients formally.
- **Always provide credit** and links back to original sources when sharing information (4)
- **Do not give nutritional advice to individuals clients/patients on social networking sites** (4).
- **Be aware of 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 conduct** of another professional to the appropriate regulatory body.
- It is your duty to be aware of all employer policies on social media use.



### Confidentiality

- Interactions with patients/clients in a social media setting are public and may result in inadvertent disclosure of personally identifying information, which is considered a privacy breach under the *Health Information Act*. Privacy breaches involving health information have a mandatory reporting requirement and substantial personal fines.
- **Respect and protect an individual's right to privacy** and respect the confidentiality of information obtained in providing professional services.
- **Obtain patient/client consent and permission to text or email** for professional purposes only.
- **Never post about specific client interactions or situations**, even if the patient isn't named. Even a few basic facts may be enough to identify a client to a family member or friend. Do not use pseudonyms or initials. Sharing others' information may also constitute unprofessional conduct.
- **Avoid indiscreet or public online conversations about any client or their treatment.**
- **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. Therefore, 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.

### Professional Boundaries

- Always be mindful of the professional – client relationship and professional boundaries. **Dual relationships (social/professional) should be avoided** whenever possible.
- **Never 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.

### Conflicts of Interest

- Dietitians who work with companies, endorse, or recommend products need to be mindful that conflicts of interest can be actual or perceived, and that both must be addressed. It is a requirement for dietitians to understand the importance of transparency of a post, including understanding the difference between a recommendation and an endorsement, where:
  - A **recommendation** does not include any personal or financial gain.
  - An **endorsement** may include: career advancement, public recognition, gifts/discounts received on products/services, personal or financial gain.
- Dietitians should use caution when suggesting or giving advice on a specific product. Be aware of evidence available to support given products(s) and let that guide your recommendations.
- Disclosures: Dietitians must also disclose all affiliations, partnerships, sponsorships, employment, and conflicts of interest openly, clearly, and inconspicuously, and should catch viewers'/readers' attention (8).



Blanket disclosures in a profile/bio/about section may fall below the recommended standards for disclosures because people visiting the site might read individual reviews or watch individual videos without seeing the disclosure on another page (8).

Sample disclosure might be:

- “Thanks to [brand X] for sponsoring this list.”
  - “I receive compensation for each click.”
  - “I receive a percentage back from each product sold on the following site.”
- Dietitians must be aware of the best practices for disclosure on each of the social sites they use (TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, X/Twitter, etc.) (8).

For further learning, please see:

The Canadian Code of Advertising Standards:

<http://adstandards.com/en/Standards/theCode.aspx>

Ad Standards. Influencer Marketing Disclosure Guidelines: <https://adstandards.ca/wp-content/uploads/AdStandards-Influencer-Guidelines-EN-2023-FIN.pdf>

The Competition Bureau Deceptive Marketing Practices Digest, Volume 1 (2015)

<http://www.competitionbureau.gc.ca/eic/site/cb-bc.nsf/eng/03946.html>

Word of Mouth Marketing Association Influencer Marketing Guide to Influencer Marketing

<https://womma.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-WOMMA-Guide-to-Influencer-Marketing-2017.compressed.pdf>

### Digital Media for Business

Dietitians who own businesses and who employ others must remember that they are accountable for content posted under their name or business regardless of who posted it. As a regulated member, you are accountable for ensuring posts adhere to *the Standards of Practice*, including the *Advertising Standard of Practice*, and the *Canadian Code of Advertising Standards*.

Developing an effective digital media presence requires time and effort. Social media presence of staff also needs to be managed.

Here are some things to consider (1):

- Have clear policies on social media use for staff
- Business posts must be evidence-informed, truthful, and fall within your/the business' scope of practice
- Posts must be credible and engender public trust



- Posts must consider the integrity and reputation of the profession
- Post content must be compliant with copyright law, CDA guidelines, *Standards of Practice*, and all other applicable legislation.

Clarity of understanding of your personal scope of practice/competence, the College's *Standards of Practice*, and the *Code of Ethics*, while posting mindfully and purposefully to a target audience via any digital media is the best defense against a complaint.

**Remember that you are always a professional.**

### Related Standards of Practice:

- Boundaries
- Communication
- Privacy/Confidentiality
- Professional Practice Obligations
- Conflicts of Interest

### Related Documents:

- Guidelines for Promotion and Advertising

### References:

1. Betteridge, Lise. *Social Media and Practice: Protecting Privacy and Professionalism in a Virtual World*. Practice Notes. Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers. 2011.
2. College of Chiropractors of Alberta. *2018 Digital/Social Media Guidelines for Alberta Chiropractors*. September 2018.
3. College of Registered Nurses of Alberta, College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta, and College of Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Alberta. *Social Media: e-Professionalism for Nurses*. March 2020.
4. College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta. *Advice to the Profession: Social Media*. 2020.
5. College of Physiotherapists of Alberta. *Practice Guideline: Use of Social Media*. November 2012.
6. College of Physiotherapists of Alberta. *Social Media Resource Guide for Alberta Physiotherapists*. Updated September 2017.
7. Professional Practice and Regulation division of the Canadian Nurses Association. *When private become public: The ethical challenges and opportunities of social media*. Ethics in Practice for Registered Nurses. February 2012.
8. Ad Standards. *Influencer Marketing Disclosure Guidelines*. Fall 2023.