

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to the profession to support physicians in implementing the CPSA Standards of Practice. This advice does not define a standard of practice, nor should it be interpreted as legal advice.

Advice to the Profession documents are dynamic and may be edited or updated for clarity at any time. Please refer back to these articles regularly to ensure you are aware of the most recent advice. Major changes will be communicated to our members; however, minor edits may only be noted within the documents.

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Note: This version replaces the previous Social Media Advice to the Profession document published October 2014.

The use of social media has expanded enormously in the last decade and has rapidly become an important method of communication as well as a forum for expressing opinions and debate. Understandably, many physicians engage in these activities through their use of social media. While social media offers many useful functions, its use also comes with some risks.

CPSA recognizes and supports that advocacy, either for patients, the health care system or a physician's personal livelihood, has always been an important component of the profession. CPSA also recognizes and supports the right and, arguably, societal responsibility physicians have to challenge authority when they feel it is required.

Maintaining professionalism is a key tenet of being a physician, especially when it comes to communicating with others. As individuals, physicians are very fortunate to have credibility and the respect of society simply by being part of the profession. Unfortunately, this means the actions of one physician, which may be perceived negatively, can tarnish the view of the profession as a whole. This results in the loss of credibility, respect and influence that each individual physician holds. In the world of social media, the credibility of a profession can be challenged on a daily basis, and it only takes a few comments perceived the wrong way to have a dramatic and long-lasting impact on the profession.

It's important to highlight that this document is not intended to restrict any physician's right to free speech. CPSA is providing this advice as we believe it's important to guide physicians in how best to communicate in this environment, to help prevent any miscommunication that could put both the individual physician and the profession as a whole at risk.

CPSA Perspective

Social media provides the ability to share, receive and review information globally and instantaneously, including medical information. With new tools coming online regularly, social media can include, but is not limited to:

- Twitter
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Instagram
- TikTok
- YouTube
- Blogs

While email is not traditionally considered social media, content sent in an email can be easily shared on social media networks; additional caution should be taken when drafting emails. For more information, please review the [Electronic Communication & Security of Mobile Devices](#) Advice to the Profession.

Social media can be used to enhance patient care by increasing Albertans' access to information. Social media can also be used to responsibly advocate for patient care, patient safety and improvements to the healthcare system. Physicians can use social media to advocate for the profession and their individual practices; however it is not

appropriate to leverage the physician-patient relationship for self-advocacy. Given the public and personal nature of social media, the quick, irreversible and widespread dissemination of information, the blurring of [boundaries](#) and the potential for fraudulent accounts, social media presents a number of challenges to physicians.

The unintended consequence of using social media may place physicians at risk of breaching required expectations of [privacy and confidentiality](#).

Professionalism

While it is recommended that physicians maintain separate professional and personal social media accounts, it can be extremely difficult for social media users to separate the two. Some professionals will state on their account profiles that their comments are their own and do not reflect the opinions of their employers. These statements are not effective in avoiding complaints as CPSA cannot separate personal and professional actions if a physician behaves inappropriately online.

For these reasons, physicians should be cautious about everything they post to avoid undermining their professional integrity. Posts on social media should be respectful, [conflicts of interest](#) should be mitigated and information presented must be accurate while avoiding a misrepresentation of facts. Advocating for patients and an effective healthcare system is important, and physicians are free to engage in economic and political debate online; however, when providing contrary opinions, it should be done in a professional manner.

Maintain respect for patients, colleagues, co-workers and others, and be careful not to denigrate anyone online. It is important to focus on issues and avoid personal attacks. A rule of thumb might be to only post content you would be comfortable having quoted on the front page of the paper, attributed to you. Everything posted and shared—personally or professionally—can be linked back to an individual's practice, office or clinic and colleagues. Remember that professionalism includes the [responsibility for and ownership of](#) a social media presence, and physicians retain ultimate responsibility for the content shared under their account(s). As a result, CPSA expects physicians to hold themselves accountable to the standards of professional behavior while posting online, regardless of using their professional identity, personal identity or posting under a pseudonym.

Boundaries

[Boundaries](#) are much more difficult to maintain when using social networking sites, both professionally and socially. Dual relationships (social/professional) should be avoided whenever possible.

Be aware of the potential for [conflict of interest](#) wherever a dual relationship exists in your online connections, and ensure it does not significantly affect the professional [physician-patient relationship](#).

Confidentiality of Health Information

As required for practice in general, always maintain the confidentiality of patient information. Social media sites do not provide a secure platform for confidential physician-patient interactions and should not be used for this purpose.

Never post identifiable patient information or patient images online; this can include names, clinical conditions, .prescription, doctor's note, etc.

Professional & Legal Obligations

Represent your credentials accurately, and declare [conflicts of interest](#) when applicable. Remember laws about defamation, copyright and plagiarism also apply to social media: exercise the same caution you would when preparing written publications. Always provide credit and links back to original sources when sharing information.

Do not give medical advice to individual patients on social networking sites: giving specific medical advice to a patient is considered [virtual care](#) requiring relevant follow-up and [continuity of care](#) and [must be provided on secure platforms, never on a public site](#).

Physicians posting on social media must hold themselves accountable to CPSA's [Standards of Practice](#), [Code of Conduct](#) and the [CMA Code of Ethics & Professionalism](#) in social media settings

The scope of CPSA's *Code of Conduct* extends to any environment where a physician can interact or be visible to patients and the public, including social media settings.

Fraudulent Social Media Accounts

Recent studies show that up to 50 per cent of social media accounts are fake, created to impersonate real people for a variety of reasons. While the ability to detect and prove a

fraudulent account continues to evolve, it remains extremely challenging. Being impersonated online in a negative manner can have devastating consequences, both personally and professionally.

All physicians with an online presence are encouraged to take action to protect themselves and avoid fraudulent social media accounts:

- Provide detailed professional biographies in your social media profiles (e.g., you could use details specific to your qualifications and training: “MD Doctor of Medicine, University of Alberta; Licentiate of the Medical Council of Canada Certificat, Canadian College of Family Physicians - Family Medicine”. This is a trait uncommonly found in imposter accounts. Include contact information and link to your website if applicable.
- Check your comments and messages daily to see if any fraudulent activity has been made or reported by your contacts.
- Check your security settings to ensure your posts and account information are only visible to the people who you want to see them.
- Enable two-factor authentication on your accounts so you are notified if someone ever tries to login to your account without consent.
- Do not link your social media accounts so posts from one account automatically post on another account.
- Use secure passwords which cannot easily be guessed and do not use the same password on multiple accounts.

If you believe you’ve been the victim of a fraudulent social media account, there are several steps you should immediately take:

- Report the fraudulent post or account to the social media platform immediately and change all your passwords.
- Report the situation to local law enforcement and provide CPSA with the case number, along with any advice or information you received from the social media platform.
- If posts might be construed as unprofessional conduct by calling your professional integrity into question, notify CPSA’s [Complaints Director](#) without delay. This will not preclude you from an investigation into the matter, but will demonstrate your willingness to cooperate with our processes and allow us to proceed quickly.
- Notify the [Canadian Medical Protective Association](#) (CMPA) to ensure they are aware of the situation and to obtain medico-legal guidance.

- Post to your legitimate social media accounts, advising you've been the victim of a fraudulent account. Apologize to anyone who may have been offended and clarify that the comments made do not align with your beliefs. For example:

I recently learned of an account on <social media platform> that is using my name and likeness and posting offensive statements and material. I did not create this account.

I have reported this fraudulent account to <social media platform> and the authorities.

I am sorry to those who saw this offensive content and want to state unequivocally that the views expressed on this fraudulent page are not mine.

While it is not possible to fully eliminate the risk of fraudulent activity on social media, we encourage physicians to be proactive in preventing and managing these types of situations.

Resources

CPSA staff is available to speak with physicians who have questions or concerns. Please direct inquiries to standardspractice@cpsa.ab.ca.

RELATED STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

- [Advertising](#)
- [Boundary Violations: Personal](#)
- [Boundary Violations: Sexual](#)
- [Code of Ethics & Professionalism](#)
- [Conflict of Interest](#)
- [Continuity of Care](#)
- [Job Action](#)
- [Patient Record Content](#)
- [Responsibility for a Medical Practice](#)
- [Telemedicine](#)

COMPANION RESOURCES

- CPSA's [Code of Conduct](#)
- The Alberta Medical Association:
 - [Going Social](#)

- [Medical professionalism & social media: danger or opportunity?](#)
- CMPA:
 - [Top 10 tips for using social media in professional practice](#)
 - [Social media: the opportunities, the realities](#)
- CanMEDS:
 - [Health Advocate Role of Physicians](#)