

The College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA) provides advice to the profession to support regulated members 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.

Contents

Preamble	1
CPSA Perspective	2
Professionalism	3
Boundaries.....	4
Confidentiality of health information.....	4
Professional & legal obligations.....	4
Fraudulent social media accounts	5
Resources.....	6

Preamble

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 engaging in debate. Understandably, many regulated members participate 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 regulated member’s personal livelihood, has always been an important component of the profession. CPSA also recognizes and supports the right and, arguably, societal responsibility regulated members have to challenge authority when they feel it is required.

Maintaining professionalism is a key tenet of being a regulated member, especially when it comes to communicating with others. As individuals, regulated members 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 person, which may be perceived negatively, can tarnish the view of the profession as a whole, resulting in a loss of credibility, respect and influence held by each individual regulated member. In the world of social media, the credibility of the profession can be challenged daily, and just a few comments taken the wrong way can have a dramatic, long-lasting impact.

It is important to highlight that this document is not intended to restrict any regulated member's right to free speech. CPSA is providing this advice, as we believe it is important to guide our members in how best 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:

- X (formerly known as Twitter)
- Facebook
- LinkedIn
- Instagram
- TikTok
- YouTube
- Blogs
- Forums

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. It can also be used to responsibly advocate for patient care, patient safety and improvements to the healthcare system. Regulated members can use social media to advocate for the profession and their individual practices; however, it is not appropriate to

leverage the 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 regulated members.

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

Professionalism

While it is recommended that regulated members 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 regulated member behaves inappropriately online.

For these reasons, regulated members 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 regulated members are free to engage in economic and political debate online; however, when providing contrary opinions, it should be done in a professional manner.

For more information, please refer to the [Professionalism in Public Forums](#) Advice to the Profession document.

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 regulated members 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, prescriptions, doctor's notes, etc.

Professional & legal obligations

Represent 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](#).

For example, posting daily diet tips on Facebook may not be viewed as providing medical advice/care; however, responding specifically to an individual's question about how to navigate their lactose intolerance would be considered providing medical advice.

Additionally, if a patient on social media is in another province, registration with the regulatory college in their province may be required before providing virtual care and liability coverage would need to extend to that interaction. For more information, please refer to the [Virtual Care](#) standard of practice.

Regulated members 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 CPSA-regulated member 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.

Regulated members with an online presence are encouraged to take action to protect themselves against fraudulent social media accounts:

- Provide detailed professional biographies in your social media profiles (e.g., use details specific to your qualifications and training: “MD Doctor of Medicine, University of Alberta; Licentiate of the Medical Council of Canada Certificiant, 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 comments and messages daily to see if any fraudulent activity has been made or reported by your contacts.
- Check 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 to prevent posts from one account automatically posting 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 have 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 law enforcement and/or 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 by completing the contact form at the bottom of this page: [CPSA Leadership](#). This will not preclude 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 have 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 if you have questions or concerns. Please direct inquiries to support@cpsa.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](#)
- [Virtual Care](#)

COMPANION RESOURCES

- CPSA's [Code of Conduct](#)
- [Professionalism in Public Forums](#) Advice to the Profession
- The Alberta Medical Association:
 - [Medical professionalism & social media: danger or opportunity?](#)
- CMPA:
 - [Emerging trends: Are you socially accountable?](#)
 - [Good Practices Guide: Social Media](#)
 - [Social media: the opportunities, the realities](#)
 - [Social networks in healthcare: opportunities and challenges for a connected future](#)
 - [Technology unleashed: the evolution of online communication](#)
 - [Top 10 tips for using social media in professional practice](#)
- CanMEDS: [Health Advocate Role of Physicians](#)

Review Date	Revision/Change
July 2024	Updating language; adding resources.
Aug. 2022	Added section on fraudulent accounts.
May 2020	New version: replaced original with updated guidance on developing issues.
Oct. 2019	Updated names of referenced resources.