

# When to ‘friend’ a patient: Social media tips for health care professionals

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In July 2010, Facebook reported over 500 million users,<sup>1</sup> and the use of social media through social networking websites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Bebo, and Sermo continues to grow at an almost unbelievable pace. Indeed, it is hard to find someone today who

a physician’s willingness to embrace social media will have a direct impact on a physician’s success. Popular medical blogger Kevin Pho, MD (KevinMD) noted in an op-ed published by *USA Today* that physicians who fail to embrace social media do so at their own peril and risk becoming irrelevant.<sup>2</sup>

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is not engaged in social media via social networking websites. Physicians, hospitals, and health systems are no exception, using various forms of social media to mark their services and communicate with colleagues and patients; and the number doing so increases daily. While there are many benefits to engaging in social media, there are also disadvantages to consider.

A well thought out, planned social media presence can be tremendously valuable to a physician, their peers and patients. Social media has the ability to facilitate medical discussions, increase awareness of health issues, educate consumers, improve communication with patients and serve as a marketing and recruiting tool. Some believe that

As patients increasingly use online search engines to find physicians, clinics, and hospitals and to “Google” information about physicians, it will be beneficial for a physician to have a strong and positive online reputation. Through strategic use of social media, physicians have the ability to build, frame, and leverage their online reputation.

At the same time, engaging in social media presents a host of potential professional and legal risks for a physician. This makes it critical for physicians to know and understand the benefits and risks of social media and to manage and mitigate potential risks in a manner that capitalizes on the value of social media while limiting the physician’s exposure to liability. Failing to know, understand and mitigate the associated risks can have significant consequences for physicians including, but not limited to, damaged personal and professional reputation, ethical violations, investigation and discipline by a

licensing body or regulatory entity, patient abandonment claims, malpractice exposure, criminal prosecution, fines, termination of employment, difficulties securing future employment, and legal action by social networking sites or services.

The relevancy of social media will intensify as technology and health care grow more intertwined, resulting in social media activities playing an even bigger role in a physician’s professional reputation. Thus physicians will need to weigh the benefits and risks and determine how best to manage their online reputation.

To assist physicians in knowing, understanding, and mitigating these risks, a list of tips and additional resources is provided below. These are by no means exhaustive, but serve as a springboard for further education on social media issues.

## Tips

- Take advantage of the privacy protections and settings available to you on the various social networking websites. Review your settings regularly—social networking sites are constantly evolving, as are their features, default privacy settings, and terms and conditions.
- Pause before you post. Remember that anything you post could and very well may become public, be shared with your patients, colleagues and employer(s) and follow you around for the rest of your career.
- The Internet is forever. Even if you opt for the most secure privacy settings and delete a posting, it likely still will exist in different forms.

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- Know that you are never anonymous when posting online. Google indexes anything you write on Twitter or your blog. Subpoenas can be issued requiring Internet service providers, social networking companies, and websites to produce IP addresses or e-mail addresses that identify the source of the content.
- Keep in mind that comments and pictures you post online can be misinterpreted outside their initial context.
- Frequently monitor your online presence and reputation. Many people have had their online profiles hacked and subjected their friends, followers, and fans to spam postings. Regular and frequent monitoring is especially important for physicians who enable patients to communicate with them online since patients may send urgent messages or provide vital medical history via such communications.
- Know, understand and comply with patient privacy and confidentiality laws. Many times even descriptions of a specific case or patient history can be enough to identify a patient and violate privacy and confidentiality laws.
- Know, understand and comply with all institutional and employer policies.
- Remember that copyright, trademark, slander, and libel laws apply to content posted online.
- Respect and maintain the boundaries of the physician-patient relationship in accordance with professional ethical guidelines. This can be challenging when a physician receives a friend request from a patient. See the next two tips for more on this issue.
- Keep your personal and your professional content separate. For example, a physician could create a personal Facebook page for friends and family and a separate page where patients, colleagues and others can “like” and follow the physician’s professional postings. The physician could then refer friend requests from patients and others they have a professional relationship with to the professional page.
- If you accept patients as friends on your

personal Facebook page you should take extra precautions such as: (1) not posting anything too intimate, contentious, or that could be viewed as disrespectful of patients; (2) advising patients that the confidentiality of the existence of a patient-physician relationship between them may be compromised once they are identified as a “friend,” and (3) limit the ability of “friends” to post to your wall or account.

- If you blog, don’t blog on subjects outside of your area of expertise. Keep your blog focused on general information, taking care to avoid identifying a patient or colleague without their consent. While this may seem like common sense, research has shown differently. Researchers who examined 271 medical blogs found that 17% included identifying information about another provider or patient and 3 contained patient photos.<sup>3</sup>

### Additional Resources

The American Medical Association (AMA), at its Interim Meeting of the House of Delegates in November 2010, adopted new policy that aims to help physicians maintain a positive online presence and preserve the integrity of the patient-physician relationship.<sup>4</sup> The “Professionalism in the Use of Social Media” policy sets forth a number of considerations the physician should weigh when maintaining a presence online.<sup>5</sup>

The Ohio State Medical Association

developed a free tool kit to help physicians better prepare for the legal and employment ramifications of engaging patients through social media websites. In addition to an overview of the key issues, the tool kit includes best practices, sample policies and links to numerous other helpful resources.<sup>6</sup>

KevinMD regularly blogs on social media issues and has an entire collection of social media-related postings. There is often a lively and informative exchange of ideas from readers on his postings<sup>7</sup> in the comments section.

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