

University of California, San Diego
Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences
Guidelines and Best Practices for Online Social Media Use by Student Pharmacists

Introduction

Online blogs, public mailing lists and social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace (hereafter collectively referred to as social media) are increasingly popular tools for communication and social interaction. These venues offer excellent opportunities for people to interact and are increasingly being used to potentially augment personal and, recently, professional interactions. The latter has become known as e-Professionalism. As health care professionals, student pharmacists have a special responsibility to be aware of the perceptions and use of such social media. While these sites have enormous potential to enhance communication, they are also a potential forum for lapses in professional and ethical conduct. While e-Professionalism is evolving fast and is constantly changing, the following trends are emerging. Increasingly, professionals are using social media as part of hiring criteria and to evaluate other professionals. While facilities exist within social media to provide information only to those you wish to see it, unintentional access happens frequently. At all times, intentional or otherwise, student pharmacists must be aware that the violation of legal statutes (e.g., HIPAA, etc.), and University and School policies and procedures (e.g., Professionalism Policies, Sexual Harassment Policies, etc.) in their online activities may result in disciplinary actions ranging from a letter of reprimand up to and including probation or dismissal from the School. The School does and will not actively monitor the on-line activities of the student body. However, unprofessional issues could be, and have been, brought to the School's attention through a variety of mechanisms.

Guidelines for Ethical and Professional Behavior

- Accessible postings on social media are subject to the same professional standards as any other personal interaction. The written nature, persistence and potential accessibility of these postings make them subject to particular scrutiny.
- By identifying themselves publically using social media, student pharmacists in the UCSD Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, are creating perceptions about the School, the University and the profession of Pharmacy. Students must assure that all public content is consistent with the values and professional standards of the School and the Profession.
- Public postings on social media may have legal ramifications. Comments made by students concerning patients, or who portray themselves, other students, faculty or other colleagues in an unprofessional manner can be used by the courts or professional licensing boards.
- Unprofessional public postings by others on a student's social media can reflect poorly on the student. Students should monitor their sites and ensure that the content will not be viewed as unprofessional.

Best Practices

The following are suggested best practices for e-Professionalism:

- Deletion of material from social media does not necessarily mean it is no longer available since, for example, search engines cache such content. This implies special care should be taken in posting material since it will persist.
- Due to frequent updating of social media sites, it is advisable that students regularly check their privacy settings to optimize their privacy and security.
- Students should set their privacy settings so that only people they choose have access to personal information.
- Students should consider minimizing personal information on social media profiles. It is suggested students not include addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers, PID numbers, passport numbers, driver's license numbers, birth dates or any other information that could be used to obtain personal records.
- It is suggested students should make sure that any photos in which they are identified ("tagged") are not embarrassing or professionally compromising. Student's should "untag" themselves from any photos that they cannot have removed. Students should refrain from "tagging" others without the explicit permission of those people.
- Students should maintain the privacy of colleagues, faculty and staff unless they have been given permission to use the person's likeness or name on their site.
- HIPAA regulations apply to all comments made on social media sites and violators are subject to the same prosecution as with other HIPAA violations.
- Students should take all precautions they would normally use in public forums to maintain patient privacy when using social media.
- Online discussions of specific patients should be avoided, unless on secure healthcare related networks, even if all identifying information is excluded. It may be possible for someone to identify the patient from the context of the discussion.
- Under no circumstances is it appropriate or legal to post photos of patients or patient body parts on social media without the specific written permission of the patient. Students should be aware that even if they have permission from the patient to use a photo, that photo may be downloaded and distributed by others, which may then violate the terms of the permission.
- Interactions with patients through social media should be avoided. This provides numerous opportunities for violating privacy restrictions and may have legal consequences.