

INTERIM Guidelines for the use of Social Media by Health Science Students at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University

Health professionals and health science students registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) or the South African Nursing Council (SANC) must adhere to a code of conduct that fosters public trust. This also applies to social media use and presence. The purpose of this guideline is to summarize the possible risks, specifically for students at the FHSM, and the recommended preventative actions. General guidance on social media use for students at Stellenbosch University is addressed in the following documents:

- [Disciplinary Code for Students of Stellenbosch University](#)
- [Policy on Unfair Discrimination and Harassment](#)
- [Electronic Communications Policy](#)

Social media can be web based or related to use of mobile devices/technology. The following encompass social media:

- Social networks: face book, twitter, Whatsapp, Linked In
- Content sharing: You Tube, Instagram, TikTok in addition to personal and professional blogs, e mail, SMS, electronic journals, internet discussion forums, comments sections of websites.

Risks of social media use:

- Data shared is not secure despite privacy settings. Identity and location can be traced through linked accounts and IP addresses. Even if a post is deleted, the content may persist and be copied and stored (cache and cookie systems).
- Online confidentiality breaches, use of profanity, discriminatory comments and pictures showing students in compromising situations (intoxicated, illicit drug use) have led to official warning or dismissal (US study)¹. In addition, online posts may jeopardize a job or study application due to online presence being used as a screening tool during recruitment processes.

Key Messages from the HPCSA – Booklet 16: Ethical Guidelines on Social Media^{2,3}

Applies to all health practitioners and health sciences students registered with the HPCSA.

- **Ensure Patient confidentiality is maintained at all times:** Patient confidentiality is governed by the human right to privacy in the SA Constitution, the National Health Act, and Protection of Personal Information Act. Disclosure of confidential patient information may occur with a court order, patient consent or legal directive. Confidential information can be shared for the public good or patient welfare. Informed written consent is necessary to share any personal or confidential information on social media platforms, irrespective of whether the information is anonymized. The obligation to keep information confidential applies even after the death of the patient.
- **Maintain Clear Boundaries between personal and professional life:** Through social media, patients may have unrestricted access to a student's or health professional's personal information. This may compromise the professional relationship. The potential exploitation of a patient may exist based on the power dynamic within this relationship. Inappropriate messages and friend requests from patients must be dealt with politely and firmly. Health care practitioners and students should separate their personal and professional social media accounts. Medical advice should not be given on social media unless in an emergency. Even then it must be "evidence based, scientifically sound and generic" and must be followed by a recommendation that the patient consult his/her health care practitioner.

- **Be aware of and maintain your image as a health professional:** It is routine practice for news media to search online platforms for stories for wider public dissemination. Inappropriate posts on social media could bring the profession, learning institution and employer into disrepute and impact the career and future job prospects of an individual. In addition to legal action, it can lead to a ruling of unprofessional conduct by the HPCSA.
- **Precautionary Measures when using social media:** Health care professionals and students must avoid using social media when stressed, tired, upset or under the influence of alcohol.

References:

1. Chretien KC. **Online posting of unprofessional content by medical students.** *JAMA*; 2009;302(12):1309. DOI:10.1001/jama.2009.1387
2. HPCSA. **Guidelines For Good Practice In The Health Care Professions. Ethical Guidelines on Social Media. Booklet 16.** Accessed from https://www.hpcsa.co.za/Uploads/Professional_Practice/Ethics_Booklet.pdf
3. **South African Medical Association. Using Social Media: Practical and Ethical Guidance for Doctors and Medical Students.** Accessed from <https://www.samedical.org/for-our-doctors/ethics>

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