



Guidance on the use of Social Media

This guidance must be read in conjunction with The Code (2016) prepared by the General Chiropractic Council (GCC), which sets out standards for conduct, performance and ethics for chiropractors to ensure the competent and safe practice of chiropractic.

This guidance is not intended to cover every situation that you may face. However, it does set out broad principles to enable you to think through and act professionally, ensuring patient interest and public protection at all times.

To note: The GCC will review this guidance as necessary and update it as appropriate, and reapply the principles of the Code to any critical changes or new situations that may emerge.

Standards within the Code with reference to social media:

B4:

Strictly maintain patient confidentiality when communicating publicly or privately, including in any form of social media or when speaking to or writing in the media.

Other Standards in The Code that reinforce and link to the above:

B3 Use only legal and verifiable information when publicising yourself as a chiropractor, advertising your work and/or your practice including on your website. The information must be honest and comply with all advertising codes and standards.

B5 Ensure your behaviour is professional at all times, including outside the workplace, thus upholding and protecting the reputation of, and confidence in, the profession and justifying patient trust.

“Social Media” describes web-based applications that allow people to create and exchange content. In this guidance Social Media is used as a portfolio term to include blogs and microblogs (such as Tumblr and Twitter), internet forums (including professional e-forums), content communities (such as YouTube and Flickr), social networking sites (such as Facebook and LinkedIn), and other current or emerging social networking platforms. Any professional e-forum or professional social media site that you may belong to is equally relevant.

The standards expected of chiropractors do not change just because they are communicating with others through social media as opposed to being face-to-face or through other traditional media. However, using social media does create new circumstances in which the established principles of professionalism apply.

As well as this guidance, and the general guidance on confidentiality, you should also create and/or comply with social media policies within your place of work.

Using social media responsibly

If used responsibly and appropriately, social networking sites can offer several benefits for chiropractors. These include: building and maintaining professional relationships; establishing or accessing chiropractic support networks; and being able to discuss specific issues, interests, research and clinical experiences with other healthcare professionals globally. In addition, social media, if used properly, is a good way to market yourself as a chiropractor and/or to advertise a chiropractic practice.

To use social media responsibly you must make sure that you keep yourself informed and up-to-date, think before you post and be sensitive to protecting your reputation and that of the profession. This means:

- (i) you should familiarise yourself with how individual social media applications work and be clear about their advantages and disadvantages;
- (ii) you should realise that even the strictest privacy settings have limitations. This is because once something is online it is not easy to retrieve it and can be easily copied and redistributed by other people; and
- (iii) where you are unsure whether something you post online could compromise your professionalism or your reputation, you should think about what the information means for you in practice and how it affects your responsibility to keep to the Code. It is best to err on the side of caution and not to post it.

It is important to consider with whom and with what you associate with on social media. For example, merely acknowledging someone else's post can imply that you endorse or support their point of view despite any disclaimer you may use.

You must also consider the possibility of other people mentioning you in inappropriate posts. If you have used social media for a number of years, it is important to consider, in relation to the Code, both what you have posted online in the past and what others have posted about you, and whether all posts should remain on your account(s). Equally, remember that anything you or others post about you will likely be online for many years to come.

Privacy

Using social media can blur the boundaries between an individual's private and professional life. Online information can be easily accessed by others. Chiropractors must be aware of the limitations of privacy online, it is strongly advised that you regularly review the privacy settings for every social media account you have, and adopt conservative privacy settings where these are available. It is important to understand that not all information can be protected on social media and in particular:

- (i) social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality whatever privacy settings are in place;
- (ii) patients, your employer and potential employers, or any other organisation that you have a relationship with, may be able to access your personal information;
- (iii) information about your location may be embedded within photographs and other content and available for others to see; and
- (iv) once information is published online it can be difficult to remove as other users may distribute it further.

Anonymity

You must be aware that content uploaded anonymously can, in many cases, be traced back to its point of origin. Although you may intend to post anonymously, you should be mindful that your comments may in fact be attributed to you in some way.

If you identify yourself as a chiropractor in publicly accessible social media, you must also identify yourself by name. This is because any material written by authors who represent themselves as chiropractors is likely to be taken on trust, and may reasonably be taken to represent the views of the profession more widely. If you are willing to give online information or advice as a member of the profession, then you should be willing to be identified and accountable for that.

Professional behaviour

Chiropractors should be conscious of their online “image” and how it may impact on their professional standing and the reputation of the wider chiropractic profession. As well as any legal proceedings that could follow, you may put your registration at risk if, on any form of social media, (either personal or professional accounts), you act in any way that is unprofessional, or unlawful including (but not limited to):

- (i) sharing confidential information;
- (ii) posting images of patients and people receiving care (or pictures from which they can be identified) without their consent;
- (iii) posting or otherwise permitting inappropriate images of yourself such that your professional reputation or that of the wider profession may be adversely affected;
- (iv) posting inappropriate comments about patients or other chiropractors;
- (v) bullying, intimidating or exploiting people;
- (vi) building or pursuing relationships with patients, ex-patients, or patients’ carers;
- (vii) stealing personal information or using someone else’s identity;
- (viii) encouraging violence or self-harm; and
- (ix) inciting hatred or discrimination.

If you are aware that another chiropractor has used social media in any of these ways, it is your professional duty to report it to the GCC and/or the police. You may find it useful to refer to our guidance note on candour. The note sets out your professional duty to act openly and honestly with patients, regulators and when raising concerns.

When interacting with or commenting about colleagues, other chiropractors or chiropractic practices on social media, you must be aware that online posts are subject to the same laws of copyright and defamation¹ as written or verbal communications, whether they are made in a personal or professional capacity. Use of a user name or any form of anonymised identity online does not prevent action from being taken against you or website owners being forced to divulge who you are.

¹ Defamation is the act of making an unjustified statement about a person or organisation that is considered to harm their reputation.

Maintaining boundaries

Social media can create risks where social and professional boundaries become unclear. You must ensure your behaviour on social media does not cross professional boundaries.

It is recommended that chiropractors do not accept Facebook friend requests or any other means of communication on other social media forums from current or former patients or patient's carers on their personal accounts.

If a patient or patient's carer contacts you about their care or other professional matters through your personal profile, you should indicate that you cannot mix social and professional relationships and, where appropriate, direct them to your professional profile if you have one, or more suitably your professional contact details such as your secure email or telephone number.

You SHOULD not contact or communicate through social media with a patient, or carer, neither in a professional nor personal capacity from a personal account. It is accepted that patients may wish to, or find it more convenient to contact a chiropractor on social media, for example by Facebook messenger or LinkedIn. Any response to a patient on social media should be done through your professional account.

If you currently do not have a professional account where patients and potential patients can contact you for your services, or to which you can direct patients to, we strongly recommend that you create a professional social media account.

By communicating with patients and/or patients carers in a professional manner through your professional account and not your personal account, the risk of misunderstandings and blurring of boundaries are minimised.

Maintaining confidentiality

The ethical and legal duty to protect patient confidentiality applies equally to social media as it does when communicating privately or through more traditional means. (You may find it useful to refer to our guidance note on confidentiality).

You must not use social media to discuss individual patients, ex-patients or the treatment of those patients. You may use social media sites that are targeted towards professional communities where current practice and specific (often unusual) but anonymised circumstances are discussed.

While participation in such sites can be very valuable, the requirement to maintain confidentiality and not to share identifiable information about patients

and ex patients remains. Be aware that it can often be easy to breach this requirement inadvertently (especially if you have a very specialised practice or operate in a small area). If you post lots of information, even if across many different posts it can be possible to identify patients by the sum of information that you make available.

Other Relevant Information:

- *Hyperlinks to relevant legislation and important information*, GCC April 2015, www.gcc-uk.org/UserFiles/Docs/Legislation%20Relevant-Reference-Links-April15.pdf
- *Guidance on using social media responsibly*, NMC, March 2015, www.nmc-uk.org
- *Doctors' use of social media*, GMC, March 2013, www.gmc-uk.org
- *Guidance on Confidentiality*, GCC, June 2016, www.gcc-uk.org