

GCC Registrant Guidance

Social Media and Messaging

October 2021

Introduction ([indicates hyperlink](#))

1. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the General Chiropractic Council's (GCC) Code (the [GCC Code](#)), which sets out the standards of conduct, performance and ethics for chiropractors, ensuring the competent and safe practice of chiropractic.
2. This guidance is not intended to advise you on every possible eventuality but sets out broad principles to enable you to think through a situation and act professionally, always upholding the patient's best interests and public protection.

What is social media?

3. Social media describes web-based applications that allow people to create and exchange content. In this guidance 'social media' is used as an umbrella term to include blogs and microblogs (such as Tumblr and Twitter), internet forums (including professional e-forums), content communities (such as YouTube, Instagram and Flickr), social networking sites (such as Facebook and LinkedIn), messaging applications (such as WhatsApp, Messenger, Telegram, Signal and Kik) and other current or emerging social networking platforms (such as Pinterest, TikTok, Snapchat, Reddit, Vimeo and Quora)¹. Any professional e-forum or professional social media site that you may belong to is equally relevant.
4. The standards expected of chiropractors do not change simply because they are communicating with others through social media, as opposed to being face to face, or through other traditional forms of media. However, social media does create new circumstances in which the established principles of professionalism apply.
5. As well as this guidance, and the GCC's general [Guidance on Confidentiality](#), you should also create and/or comply with social media policies within your place of work.

What does the GCC Code say about social media?

6. Social media use falls under Principle B of the Code: "Act with honesty and integrity and maintain the highest standards of professional and personal conduct." This must guide you in your behaviour and practice, with the principle that the health and well-being of a patient comes first. You must follow procedures set down by the regulator.

¹ The examples given in paragraph 3 are non-exhaustive.

7. The key standard within the [**GCC Code**](#) with reference to social media is:

Standard 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 GCC Code that reinforce and link to B4 are:

Standard B3:

Ensure your advertising is legal, decent, honest and truthful as defined by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and conforms to their current guidance, such as the CAP Code.

Standard 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.

Using social media responsibly

8. If used responsibly and appropriately, social media sites and messaging applications 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.
9. To use social media and messaging applications responsibly, you must ensure that you keep yourself informed and up to date. Think carefully before you post and be sensitive to protecting your reputation and that of the profession. This means:
 - You should familiarise yourself with how individual social media applications work and be clear about their advantages and disadvantages.
 - You should realise and understand that even the strictest privacy settings have limitations. Privacy settings can be complex and are different on each platform. Failure to understand privacy settings or ignorance of them is no excuse. Once something is online, it is not easy to retrieve or delete, and can easily be copied and redistributed by other people.

- You should think carefully about posting information relating to your personal life on professional accounts, and vice versa. Would you be happy for these different audiences to see that material?
 - 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 principles of the [GCC Code](#). It is always best to err on the side of caution, and not to post it.
10. It is important to consider with whom and 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, particularly given the rise in functionality that enables you to 'react' to a post. 'Associate' could include the people or groups you follow, the posts you react to or share, the hashtags you use in a post, or the 'handle' (name) you choose to go by. You can still be held responsible for content you have associated with, even if you did not create it.
11. You must consider the possibility of other people mentioning or tagging you in inappropriate posts. If you have used social media for several years, it is important to consider, in relation to the Code, 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), particularly posts from before you held professional registration. Remember, anything you or others post about you will likely be online for many years, unless active steps are taken to remove it.

Privacy

12. Using social media and messaging applications 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 and messaging account you have (particularly as they are different for each platform) and adopt conservative privacy settings where these are available. Sometimes, the privacy setting of each individual post needs to be considered, as well as that associated with your overall profile. It is important to understand that not all information can be protected on social media, and in particular:
- Social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality, whatever privacy settings are in place.
 - Patients, your employer and potential employers, or any other organisation that you have a relationship with, may be able to access your personal information.

- Information about your location may be embedded within photographs and other content, and available for others to see.
- Once information is published online it can be difficult to fully remove as, for example, other users may take screenshots or distribute it further (ie retweet) At this point there are almost no options available to stop further distribution of the information.

Anonymity

13. 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.
14. 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 held accountable.

Professional behaviour

15. 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 GCC registration at risk if, on any form of social media (be it personal or professional accounts), you act in any way that is unprofessional or unlawful including, but not limited to:
 - Sharing confidential information
 - Posting images of patients and people receiving care (or pictures from which they can be identified) without their consent
 - Posting or otherwise permitting inappropriate images of yourself such that your professional reputation or that of the wider profession may be adversely affected
 - Posting inappropriate comments about patients, chiropractors or other healthcare professionals, such as GPs, osteopaths etc.
 - Bullying, intimidating, harassing or exploiting people

- Building or pursuing relationships with patients, former patients or patients' carers
 - Stealing personal information or using someone else's identity
 - Encouraging violence or self-harm
 - Inciting hatred or discrimination
 - Generally using language that other people may deem to be rude, offensive or unprofessional
16. 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 the GCC [Guidance on Candour](#), which sets out your professional duty to act openly and honestly with patients, regulators and when raising concerns.
17. When interacting with or commenting on social media about colleagues, other chiropractors or chiropractic practices, you must be aware that online posts are subject to the same laws of copyright and defamation² as written or verbal communications, whether they are made in a personal or professional capacity. Use of a username, 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.

Maintaining boundaries

18. 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.
19. It is recommended that chiropractors do not accept or initiate 'friend' or 'follow' requests or engage in any other means of communication on other social media forums with current or former patients or patients' carers, on their personal accounts. This includes direct messaging or liking posts.
20. 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, or contact details such as your secure email or telephone number.
21. You should not contact or communicate with a patient or carer through social media, in either a professional or personal capacity, via your personal account. It is accepted that patients may wish or find it more convenient to contact a

² Defamation is the act of making an unjustified statement about a person or organisation that is considered to harm their reputation.

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 or business page.

22. If you currently do not have a professional account where patients and/or potential patients can contact you regarding chiropractic services, we recommend that you create a professional social media account or business page for your practice.
23. By communicating with patients and patients' carers in a professional manner through your professional account and not your personal account, the risks of misunderstandings and blurring of boundaries are reduced. It is important to remember that communicating with patients in this manner does not change your responsibility to maintain comprehensive patient records. Consideration should be given to what information needs to be transferred into clinical records.

Maintaining confidentiality

24. The ethical and legal duty to protect patient confidentiality applies equally to social media and messenger applications, as it does when you communicate privately with patients through more traditional means. (See GCC [Guidance on Confidentiality](#).)
25. You must not use social media to discuss existing or past patient treatments. You may use social media sites that are targeted towards professional communities where current practice and specific (often unusual) but anonymised circumstances are discussed.
26. While participation in such sites can be very valuable, the requirement to maintain confidentiality and not to share identifiable information about current and former patients remain. 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

27. Your professional association should be able to advise you on specific posts or content. However, if in doubt, the safest position to adopt is not to post.
28. The GCC produces several guidance documents that are related to social media use. (See end of Guidance for links.)
29. Despite the challenges discussed, social media can provide many positive and helpful opportunities for chiropractors. Most professionals using social media

find it beneficial and do so in line with professional standards and without any problems.

Useful links

- GCC website: www.gcc-uk.org
- The GCC Code: www.gcc-uk.org/the-code
- GCC Guidance on Candour: www.gcc-uk.org/guidance-candour
- GCC Guidance on Confidentiality:
www.gcc-uk.org/guidance-confidentiality
- GCC Guidance on Advertising: www.gcc-uk.org/guidance-advertising
- GCC Statement on Conflicts of Interest: www.gcc-uk.org/joint-statements
- GCC Guidance on Consent: www.gcc-uk.org/guidance-consent
- GCC Guidance on Maintaining Sexual Boundaries:
www.gcc-uk.org/guidance-boundaries

Previous editions

Guidance on the use of social media, published April 2016

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