



AMA

# A GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA & MEDICAL PROFESSIONALISM:

The tips and traps every doctor and medical student should know





## INTRODUCTION

The use of social media by the medical profession is common and growing.

It has changed the way we can communicate with each other and the wider community.

We can now share information, create content, have meaningful social interactions, and collaborate in real-time for professional and personal benefits.

However, social media has the potential to blur the boundaries between private and professional.

There can be immense professional benefits by having an active presence through the proper use of social media, but inappropriate online behaviour has the potential to undermine professional integrity, doctor-patient and doctor-colleague relationships, future employment opportunities, and public trust and confidence in the medical profession.

As doctors and medical students, our professional standards remain the same whether communicating through social or traditional media, and social media can raise some ethical dilemmas that you might not have thought about as part of your everyday use.

The revised guide to social media and medical professionalism will help ensure you can enjoy using social media while maintaining the standards of ethical and professional conduct expected of doctors by the profession and wider community.

This guide has been reviewed and endorsed by the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and its Council of Doctors in Training (AMACDT), the New Zealand Medical Association (NZMA), the New Zealand Medical Students' Association (NZMSA), and the Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) with input from the Avant and MDA National.





# Have you ever...

Googled yourself? Are you comfortable with the results that are shown?

Posted information about a patient or person from your workplace on Facebook or Twitter?

Checked whether there is a social media policy where you work or are on placement?

Added patients as contacts on social media?

Made a public comment online that could be considered offensive?

Become a member of any group or 'liked' a page that might be considered racist, sexist, or otherwise derogatory?

Put up photos or videos of yourself online that you would not want your patients, employers or people from your workplace to see?

Checked your privacy settings on Facebook?

Felt that a friend has posted information online that may result in negative consequences for them? Did you let them know?





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# 01

## YOU'RE ALWAYS A DOCTOR



### KEY TIPS

- + Think carefully about publishing something on social media if you would not be comfortable having your patients/colleagues/employers see it.
- + Take care not to post images or comments that might be endorsing activities or behaviour that could damage your professional reputation or be in breach of your professional obligations.
- + Remember the content you post may be discoverable.
- + Never assume that you will be able to delete something that you have posted online.
- + Think about not using your full name and ensuring photos that can easily identify you are not visible to the public.
- + Where possible, try to control what and when photos of you are posted online.
- + Be aware of your professional and employer's social media policies.

Social media is designed to connect people. Different people use social media in different ways and we're constantly fed mixed messages about using social media.

Professional capacity? Personal capacity? Not at all?

Some use it solely in a professional capacity while others use it personally, and many use a mix of the two. While you may think your personal and professional profiles are different and separate, often they're connected.

The reality is that no matter what happens privately, you are always a doctor and need to consider how you present yourself. Your professional character may be judged by the way you conduct yourself online.<sup>1</sup>

If you post significant amounts of personal information on social media, you need to consider who has access, and what impact this might have on your professional reputation and relationships.

Unlike other media, social media can quickly spread information to a vast number of people globally.



**||** The hospital considered it a serious lapse in professionalism and took disciplinary action against the doctor.

**While not illegal, situations like the ones described in these case studies may be damaging professionally for you and/or your employer. You may also find yourself the subject of a complaint to your registration authority.**

#### **Case study 1:** Unprofessional comments

A doctor in training posted some impulsive comments on an online forum about a TV program on transgender adults.

The person who was the subject of the derogatory comments clicked on the doctor's profile which identified the hospital they worked at and they were able to make a complaint to the hospital.

The hospital considered it a serious lapse in professionalism and took disciplinary action against the doctor.

Example provided by MDA National.

#### **Case study 2:** Professionalism and hospital policies

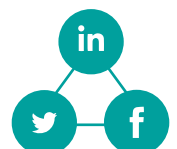
A surgical registrar was talking to a scrub nurse at the gym and they decided it would be funny to pose for some cross fit activities in the operating theatre at the hospital using the theatre equipment.

Photos were taken of the poses and the registrar posted them on the gym's Facebook page with a comment that identified both the hospital and the registrar.

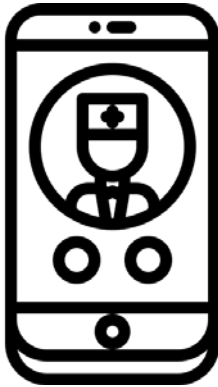
The hospital administration became aware of the photos (after they had received more than 120,000 Likes on the gym's Facebook page).

The registrar was asked to attend a meeting and was reprimanded for using the hospital and its equipment in a manner that was not appropriate and warned not to do it again.

Example provided by MDA National.



## ... ask yourself “What would my patients/ colleagues/employers think if they saw this?”

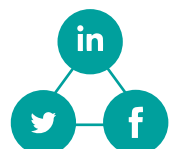


Your personal social media activities could impact negatively on how patients, colleagues and/or others perceive you.

Consider how you portray yourself on your personal social media profiles and how easy it is for patients to find you. Not using your full name and ensuring photos that can easily identify you are not visible to the public are two ways to prevent patients from finding you on social media.

Check what your profile looks like to someone who isn't your friend and remove any photos or posts that you do not want the general public to see.

Before posting, always ask yourself “What would my patients/ colleagues/employers think if they saw this?” and “Would this be in breach of my employer’s policies, my employment conditions and/or my obligations under the regulatory authority?” If in doubt, re-evaluate your post!



# 02

## CONFIDENTIALITY MATTERS, AND IDENTIFIERS ARE EVERYWHERE



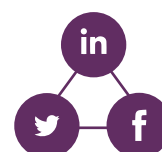
### KEY TIPS

- + Obtain written and specific patient consent before you post patient information or images online.
- + Protect patient information by de-identifying the information and/or image you post.
- + Remember it may still be possible to identify a patient, staff member, or your employer from the information you post; for example from the timing of the post, from information that remains in the background of an image or in the metadata of an image.<sup>2</sup>
- + Check your employer's policies about posting on social media. Even with patient consent, you may be prohibited from posting content by hospital policies.<sup>3</sup>
- + Be wary about the secondary use of data. For example, granting permission for an online social platform to access your profile or other information on your device e.g. address book, may allow access to confidential patient details. Check the terms and conditions before signing up.
- + As a precaution, turn off auto-upload of pictures to social media or back up sites.

Doctors have a responsibility to ensure that their use of social media is consistent with their ethical and legal obligations to protect patient confidentiality. It is important to remember that breaches of patient confidentiality online can have far wider implications because of the reach of social media and permanency of digital information.<sup>1</sup>

Maintaining patient confidentiality upholds the public's trust in the medical profession and maintains our ability to treat patients effectively.

Breaching confidentiality can result in complaints to your employer or medical registration authority (with potential disciplinary action, including loss of employment/registration), the involvement of the Privacy Commissioner, or even legal action (including civil claims for damages or criminal prosecution depending on the content).





“ ... even when the image is deleted from a forum, it may live on as a cached file or archived content on a search engine

### What about sharing clinical images online?

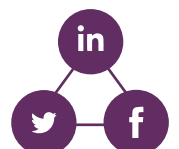
Maybe you've shared a clinical image taken on your phone in a professional and/or closed online forum for clinical and/or educational purposes.

Remember that clinical images are “health information” and must be treated with the same privacy and confidentiality as any other health record or information.

Never use a clinical image in an online forum unless you have the patient's consent to do so, or if the patient would reasonably expect you to use the image in this way, or if you are otherwise permitted by law to do so.

If you send a clinical image to the wrong person or post an image online that you later believe breaches patient confidentiality or your professional or employment obligations, seek advice from hospital management, your employer or your medical defence organisation as soon as possible.

On some forums, you may be able to delete the image or the post immediately. However, you should be aware that even when the image is deleted from a forum, it may live on as a cached file or archived content on a search engine. This means that the content is still searchable, but when the link is clicked, nothing will appear. You may submit a request to remove cached content from services such as Google after you have confirmed that the original content has been deleted on the forum or another site.



“ ... If you do need to communicate with a colleague about a patient, check if there is a platform endorsed by your hospital ...



### **Should I use my own phone to take a clinical image?**

Before using your own phone to take a clinical image or sharing any image online, familiarise yourself with your organisation's policy on clinical images and social media.

### **Security of communication about patients between medical colleagues**

When medical students (and junior doctors) join a medical team for a new term, they are often added to the team's 'group message' for communicating such as WhatsApp.

While this is not public messaging, security of these mobile apps has been raised recently<sup>4</sup> and some hospitals are creating their own secure mobile messaging platforms to replace them.

If you do need to communicate with a colleague about a patient, check if there is a platform endorsed by your hospital/employer first rather than using social media.



# 03

## CONSIDER WHO YOU FRIEND OR SHARE INFORMATION WITH ON SOCIAL MEDIA



### KEY TIPS

- + Consider separating your online professional and personal profile and content.
- + It is advisable not to extend friend requests to patients.
- + Respond to friend requests from a patient by directing them to a professional social networking page.
- + If you pay a company to manage your social networking profile/s, make sure the company understands the professional standards and guidelines you are bound by. Remember you are still responsible for any material they post on your behalf.

Doctors and medical students have a duty to patients and the community to maintain professional boundaries.

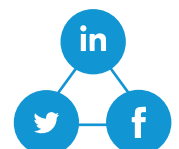
A power imbalance exists between doctors and patients, and the maintenance of clear professional boundaries is important to the integrity of the doctor-patient relationship and protects patients from exploitation.

Friending or following a patient, former patients or close relatives of a patient on social media can make it difficult for doctors to maintain clear professional and personal boundaries as patients can connect with you on a personal, rather than professional, level and this may be misinterpreted by patients.

While it is advisable not to establish online friendships with patients e.g. not accepting friend requests from patients nor sending friend requests to patients, doctors working in small communities are likely to have friends who are patients, former patients, or close relatives of patients, and may need to think carefully about the best possible way to maintain professional boundaries online.<sup>5</sup>

You could think about creating an online profile that is maintained as a professional page only or join a professional social networking site.

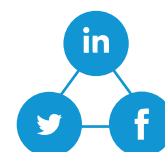
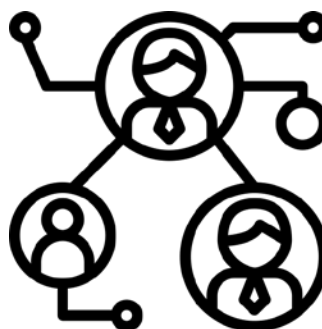
Patients can become friends or fans of your professional page, which only provides information relevant to the professional practice of that doctor.



### An uncomfortable hypothetical...

You get a friend request on your personal social networking site from someone whose name sounds very familiar, but they have a photo of a dog as their profile picture. You accept the request. After looking through their profile page, you realise that it is one of your patients. The patient sends you a message to let you know that they cannot make their next clinic appointment but would like to know their histology results from a test ordered while the patient was in the hospital. The patient also throws in a cheeky comment about some photos they saw of you wearing swimmers at the beach.

If a patient does request you as a friend on your personal social networking site, a polite message informing them that it is your policy not to establish online friendships with patients would be an appropriate response. You could also consider directing them to a professional social networking page.



# 04

## MAINTAINING YOUR PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION ONLINE



### KEY TIPS

- + Did you know:
  - the information you post on your personal profile can be linked back to you professionally.
  - any information you post anonymously can be linked back to you.
  - anything you post in a closed group can be copied and shared.
- + Think carefully about whether becoming a member or fan of a group might be considered racist, sexist, or otherwise defamatory.
- + Consider whether “liking” or “following” groups that contain potentially controversial topics or images could reflect poorly on you as a doctor and the profession.
- + Browse through all the groups that you have joined and consider whether these are an accurate reflection of the person you are, and the values that you hold. Report inappropriate content to site administrators and request that it be removed.
- + Safeguard your online reputation. If you have not created an online profile, search engines like Google may do it for you and it may not be a profile you like! Google your name on a regular basis to see what comes up.<sup>6</sup>

Be aware that any material posted online, even anonymously can be traced to the original author.

Exercise sound judgement when posting online and avoid making gratuitous or unsubstantiated comments about individuals or organisations. This could be viewed as a breach of your professional obligations under the regulatory authority and be subject to allegations of bullying.

Professional codes of conduct specify that doctors should not engage in behaviours that can harm the reputation of colleagues or the profession.

Defamation is the communication or publication of false information about a person or certain organisations that damages their reputation. Material posted online by individuals or organisations that are false, untrue, misleading or deceptive can have significant legal and financial consequences.

Be mindful about any comments you make about colleagues (medical or otherwise) and employers and consider whether it could breach your professional obligations or policies held by your employer, organisation or regulatory authority.



## Clearly identifying yourself can lend credibility and accountability to online communications

Online comments should always be respectful. Think carefully about whether you should post anything online if you are angry or upset.

If you see content that has been posted by other doctors that may be harmful to patients or the public and/or appears unprofessional, you should bring it to the attention of the individual and/or report it to your regulatory authority. You may also flag harmful content for removal on sites like Google and Facebook.

### Should I post anonymously?

If you are posting as a doctor, our advice is to avoid posting anonymously and to use your own name.

If you are posting personally, it's up to you but as a rule, if it's something that may impact on your professional integrity, it might be better to avoid posting it online in the first place.

Clearly identifying yourself can lend credibility and accountability to online communications.

When posting professionally, consider posting your credentials. It's also a good idea to state whether you are or are not representing your employer or institution.

### Case study 3: Posting anonymously

In August 2018 the NHS England Director of Primary Care and Deputy Medical Director resigned following revelations he had posted anonymously on an online forum used by GPs under the pseudonym 'Devil's Advocate'.

While his intention had been to provoke a balanced discussion about contentious issues by acting as the 'devil's advocate', his comments were found to be in breach of NHS policy and offensive to colleagues. The NHS determined the postings had severely compromised his integrity and that his position at NHS England was no longer tenable.

### Is it ok to tag colleagues?

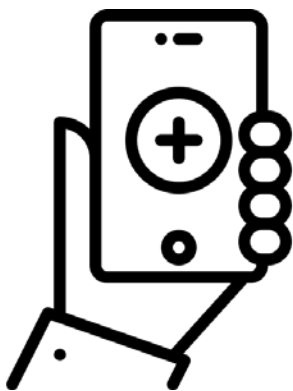
Always be courteous when communicating with colleagues over social media, particularly when in public view. When sharing social media posts with colleagues or 'tagging' them to draw their attention to it, be mindful that they may not wish to be associated with it in a public forum.



## Understand and review your privacy settings

### KEY TIPS

- + Understand the privacy and security settings of your social media platforms and review these regularly.
- + Don't post information which could be used for identity theft or used inappropriately by a third party.
- + Keep your passwords secure.
- + Consider encryption.
- + Deleting information does not provide absolute protection – it is almost certainly still stored somewhere in cyberspace, and theoretically permanently accessible.



## What about closed groups?

Closed professional groups allow peers to engage and discuss issues in a private environment. Administrators must approve members and only group members can see posted content.

Closed groups can be useful in bringing together people with a common interest and can create a sense of community. They can be a great way to engage with your peers or enact change – either socially or in the workplace.

They can also be used as a platform for advocacy on important issues.

But, it is still important to be mindful of your behaviour as many closed groups may not be as private as they appear, and non-medical people may also be members. Consider how the public would perceive your interactions in these groups, even if it is intended for medical professionals only.

Remember that anything you post in a closed group might be copied and shared,<sup>7</sup> and that the same professional standards apply to your behaviour as part of a closed group.

It's your decision on how secure you want to make your social media accounts, but privacy can never be guaranteed and there is always the risk that what you post could be shared.

It's worthwhile reviewing your social media content regularly to ensure you're happy with what's displayed.



# 05

## YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR ADVERTISING



### KEY TIPS

- + Whether you are using traditional or social media, you are responsible for your advertising.
- + Consider whether you want your website and other social media platform settings to allow users to leave comments. If you don't, then you can disable the comment section.
- + You must not use a testimonial, solicited or unsolicited, that refers to a clinical aspect of care in your advertising, including on your website and social media account.
- + Be careful about posting comments or images about your skills and services online as they may inadvertently contravene advertising guidelines.
- + You must not edit an online review that is negative to make it positive or no longer accurately reflects all the reviewer's feedback.
- + If you do find comments that could be considered as testimonials on your website or social media platforms, you should remove them to avoid potentially being found to be in breach of your professional obligations under regulatory guidelines.

Advertisements for medical services can be useful in providing information for patients.

Doctors advertising through social media should review their content regularly to make sure that all material complies with their obligations under the National Law and Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) Guidelines for advertising regulated health services in Australia<sup>8</sup>, and the Medical Council of New Zealand Statement on advertising.<sup>9</sup>

Remember you are responsible for the advertising that you publish or that is under your control. You are not expected to monitor social media for things that may be written about you in forums you don't control.

You are also expected to comply with the AHPRA's social media policy, the Medical Board of Australia's Code of Conduct in Australia, and in New Zealand, the Medical Council of New Zealand Statement on the use of the internet and electronic communication and Good Medical Practice if you are active on social media.







“ ... It’s not acceptable to use testimonials in your own advertising

### **Beware advertising testimonials**

Consumer and patient information sharing websites that invite public feedback/reviews about their experience of a health practitioner are not considered “advertising of a regulated health service” under AHPRA’s guidelines.

However, it is important to be aware that it is not acceptable to use testimonials in your own advertising, such as on your website or Facebook. This means you can’t use or quote testimonials on a site or in social media that is advertising a regulated health service, including patients posting comments about a practitioner on the practitioner’s business website.

Doctors should therefore not encourage patients to leave testimonials on websites they control and should remove any testimonials or positive reviews that are posted there.

### **Sponsorship of personal social media accounts**

It is becoming common practice for people who are popular on social media to be approached to feature products on their account. This is particularly prevalent on Instagram. Medical professionals should be mindful of how accepting sponsorship on personal social media accounts and/or supporting products for financial gain may reflect on them as a doctor and/or influence them in their practice.

Doctors should make themselves aware of any regulations that relate to the advertising of therapeutic goods by health professionals.



# 06

## MANAGING NEGATIVE PATIENT COMMENTS ONLINE

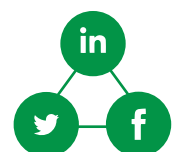


### KEY TIPS

- + If you receive a negative comment from a patient or a close relative of a patient online, resist the temptation to immediately reply angrily or defensively.
- + Seek advice from a colleague and/or AMA or medical defence organisation about the most appropriate way to respond.
- + If you can identify the person who posted the comment, consider whether it is appropriate to contact the person to discuss and address their concerns.
- + If you find messages from someone upsetting or distracting, consider blocking or muting them. Persistent harassers can be blocked from contacting you or be reported to the site.

Negative comments about you professionally or your practice in online forums can cause distress and frustration. There are several ways you can respond:

- 1 Ignoring the comments and waiting until further reviews move the negative one down the page.
- 2 If you can identify the author/s of the comments, politely ask them to withdraw them or have them removed from the website.
- 3 Requesting the forum host to remove offending comments.
- 4 Having your practice respond.
- 5 If the comments about you are false and have caused you reputational damage, consider instituting legal proceedings.



## || Certain online forums have policies and methodologies for the removal of inappropriate or fake comments

### Unwelcome online reviews...

A doctor googled their name and came across the following review:

“The worst doctor I have ever seen. I took my daughter to see him when she was very sick. He missed the diagnosis and was deliberately rough with her because he was hassled. It was like we were imposing on his time. I’d ask a taxi driver for medical advice before seeing this animal of a doctor. Never see him if you are ill – or well.”

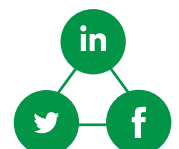
The doctor was very distressed. He did not know who had made this comment about him. He wanted to know what he could do to have the online comment deleted.

Example provided by MDA National.

Certain online forums have policies and methodologies for the removal of inappropriate or fake comments. For example, Google Maps allows users to flag inappropriate reviews on business listings, which will be assessed by Google and possibly removed. Likewise, Facebook has a flagging function for public posts as well as personal messages for abusive content.

If you do choose to respond to a negative online comment:

- 1 It is important that you don't inadvertently breach patient confidentiality and that you do so within professional boundaries.
- 2 Think carefully about what the implications for the doctor-patient relationship might be.
- 3 Keep it simple and take as neutral a tone as possible, for example: Thank you for your feedback. I am committed to improving my practice and have taken your comments into consideration.



# 07

## USING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ADVOCACY



### KEY TIPS

- + Comment within your scope of practice.
- + Post content that is well informed.
- + Abide by your professional code of conduct.
- + Be aware of your employer's policies about posting on social media.
- + If speaking on behalf of an organisation, be aware of their policies regarding acting as a spokesperson.

Using social media to communicate and engage with others can have potential benefits to doctors and the community in general.

Many doctors and medical students want to have a better connection with the public, journalists, their colleagues, business leaders and politicians and are using social media to do it.

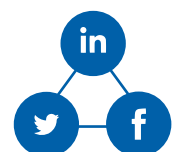
If you are going to use social media as an advocacy tool, consider the following.

#### **Identify whether you are speaking as an individual or on behalf of an organisation**

It is important to state whether you are speaking on an issue in an individual capacity or on behalf of an organisation. If speaking on behalf of an organisation, make sure you identify the organisation and have permission to act as a representative. When presenting a personal opinion which is contrary to the generally held opinion of the profession, you should indicate this is the case in order to ensure the community is properly informed.

#### **Declare any real or potential conflicts of interest**

Be upfront in declaring real or potential conflicts of interests. This is not only in line with professional standards, but also may protect you from any subsequent criticism. This applies even if you post anonymously. Any material written in a professional capacity or by authors who represent themselves as doctors is likely to be viewed by the public as such and taken on trust. Failing to declare conflicts of interests could undermine public trust, compromise the professionalism of authors and in turn risk referral to the regulatory authorities.



### **Be aware of your professional obligations if raising concerns in relation to a specific health service**

If you believe the health service or environment that you work in is inadequate or poses a threat to health, you should alert appropriate authorities rather than raising these issues through social media. You should be aware of your employer's policies regarding the use of social media to raise concerns that may be critical of, or reflect poorly on, your employer or wider health service

### **Post content regularly and develop an informed, clear narrative**

If you are going to use social media as a tool for advocacy and campaigning and want to make your voice heard on a particular topic, deliver relevant content that is engaging, thoughtful, balanced and well-informed.

### **Monitor content, conversations and engage**

Being able to engage with campaigns and conversations that are happening online creates momentum but is obviously going to bring you to people's attention. Be aware of your influence and abide by your professional code of conduct.

### **Avoid unproductive or inflammatory arguments online**

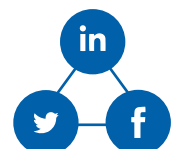
It is quite common when advocating online that all sorts of people respond, some with a well-informed counter-argument, but others may respond in an emotional way or may be blatantly seeking to start an argument. While it can be tempting to engage in a fiery debate, it is best to not respond when it is clear someone is not willing to have a reasoned and informed discussion. Doing so may reflect poorly to others who may be reading the discussion.

### **Leverage the experiences you have as a professional in your sphere of influence to create change**

Often the public wants to know and understand what doctors think on a particular health issue. Think about the content you post, if it is appropriate to do so in a professional capacity and abide by your professional obligations regarding patient confidentiality.

### **Be authentic**

Make sure you stay true to yourself as a professional and what you stand for. Engaging in genuine conversations about topics you are passionate about will help to support what you are trying to achieve on social media.



# 08

## FURTHER READING



### Australian based resources

- [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Further information on advertising and the National Law](#)
- [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Guidelines for advertising regulated health services](#)
- [Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Social media policy](#)
- [Australian Medical Association. Position Statement: Medical Professionalism - 2010. Revised 2015](#)
- [AMA Guidelines for Maintaining Clear Sexual Boundaries Between Doctors and their Patients and the Conduct of Patient Examinations 2019](#)
- [Australian Medical Association. Code of Ethics 2004. Editorially Revised 2006. Revised 2016](#)
- [Australian Medical Association. Guide to Clinical images and the use of personal mobile devices](#)
- [Medical Board of Australia. Good medical practice: a code of conduct for doctors in Australia](#)
- [Medical Board of Australia. Guidelines: Sexual boundaries in the doctor-patient relationship. 2018](#)
- [Medical students' ethics toolkit – students and social media \(BMA 2014\)](#)
- [Office of the Australian Information Commissioner \(OAIC\). Social media, information and communications technology and identity security](#)
- [RACGP. Guide for the use of social media in general practice](#)
- [Avant. Social media for doctors: keeping it professional](#)
- [MDA National. How Does my Doctor Rate?](#)
- [Social Media and the 21st-Century Scholar: How You Can Harness Social Media to Amplify Your Career](#)
- [Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code \(No.2\) 2018](#)
- [Social media - practical guidance and best practice \(BMA 2017\)](#)
- [Social media, ethics and professionalism guidance \(BMA 2017\)](#)
- [World Medical Association. Statement on the Professional and Ethical use of Social Media](#)

## **New Zealand based resources**

- [Code of Professional Conduct for Medical Students at the Universities of Auckland and Otago](#)
- [Medical Council of New Zealand. Cole's Medical practice in New Zealand](#)
- [Medical Council of New Zealand. Good Medical Practice](#)
- [Medical Council of New Zealand. Professional Boundaries in the Doctor-Patient Relationship](#)
- [Medical Council of New Zealand. Statement on the use of the internet and electronic communication](#)
- [Medical Council of New Zealand. Statement on advertising](#)
- [New Zealand Medical Association. Clinical images and the use of personal mobile devices](#)
- [New Zealand Resident Doctors Association. RDA Guidelines with regard to the use of personal mobile devices and clinical images](#)
- [Netsafe. Online safety for New Zealand.](#)