

Guidance on social media

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About this document

We have written this document to provide guidance to registrants who use social media. It explains how to use social media in a way which meets our standards.

This document cannot address every issue that might come up. We have instead focused on the issues registrants and other stakeholders told us they came across most frequently.

This guidance is focused on our standards. Some professional bodies publish useful social media guidelines to support their members to get the most from this technology. If you are employed, your employer may also have relevant policies or guidance that apply to you.

How this document is structured

This document is divided into four sections:

- Section 1 provides information about the HCPC;
- Section 2 contains some top tips for using social media;
- Section 3 provides guidance on how our standards relate to use of social media, and some relevant issues you may come across;
- Section 4 contains information about how to find out more.

Language

Throughout this document:

- 'we' and 'us' refers to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC);
- 'registrant' refers to a professional on our Register;
- 'you' or 'your' refers to a registrant.

Section 1: About us

We are a regulator and were set up to protect the public. To do this, we keep a register of professionals who meet our standards for their professional skills and behaviour. Individuals on our register are called 'registrants'.

We currently regulate 16 professions:

- Arts therapists
- Biomedical scientists
- Chiropodists / podiatrists
- Clinical scientists
- Dietitians
- Hearing aid dispensers
- Occupational therapists
- Operating department practitioners
- Orthoptists
- Paramedics
- Physiotherapists
- Practitioner psychologists
- Prosthetists / orthotists
- Radiographers
- Social workers in England
- Speech and language therapists

We may regulate other professions in the future. For an up-to-date list, please see our website at www.hcpc-uk.org

About the standards

We set standards of conduct, performance and ethics, which set out the high level principles of how we expect registrants to behave. We use the standards when a concern has been raised about a registrant, to help us decide whether we need to take action to protect the public.

As a registrant, you must make sure you are familiar with the standards and that you continue to meet them at all times.

Section 2: Top tips

The following are some top tips for using social media in a way which meets our standards. You can find information about how to put these into practice in the next section of this document.

- **Apply the same standards of behaviour as you would elsewhere.** If you wouldn't put something in a letter or email or say it out loud, don't say it on social media.
- **Think before you post.** Try to be polite and steer clear of inappropriate or offensive language.
- **Think about who can see what you share** and consider managing your privacy settings accordingly.
- **Maintain appropriate professional boundaries** if you communicate with service users or carers.
- **Do not post confidential or identifiable information.**
- **Do not post inappropriate or offensive material.**
- If you are employed, **be aware of your employer's social media policy.**
- When in doubt, **seek advice** from a friend or colleague. You can also contact us if you are unsure about the Standards.
- **Keep on posting!** Social media is a great communication tool. There's no reason why registrants shouldn't keep on using it with confidence.

Section 3: Using social media

Benefits of social media

Social media is a dynamic and effective communication tool. Registrants have told us that social media can help them to:

- develop and share their skills and knowledge;
- engage with service users and carers and provide them with information;
- network with other professionals nationally and internationally; and
- raise the profile of their profession.

We know that registrants can sometimes be anxious about using social media because they want to make sure that they always meet our standards. The vast majority of registrants who use social media already do so responsibly, in line with our standards, and without any difficulties at all. This guidance explains what our standards mean when using social media.

We have structured the guidance below under the areas of our standards which apply to the appropriate use of social media.

Communicate appropriately

The standards of conduct, performance and ethics say:

‘You must use all forms of communication appropriately and responsibly, including social media and networking websites’ (2.7)

Social media sites can provide a valuable platform for communicating with other professionals and to promote a better understanding of your profession to a wider audience. However, social media activity which is unprofessional may put your registration at risk.

You should apply the same standards as you would elsewhere when using social media. If you would not write it in a letter or an email or say it out loud, do not post it on social media. Try to be polite and respectful, and avoid using language that others might reasonably consider to be inappropriate or offensive.

Be honest and trustworthy

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say...

‘You must make sure that your conduct justifies the public’s trust and confidence in you and your profession’ (9.1)

This means you need to think about who can see what you share. Make sure you understand the privacy settings of each social media channel that you use. Even on a completely personal account, your employer, colleagues or service users may be able to see your posts or personal information. It is best to assume that anything you post online will be visible to everyone.

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics state that...

'You must make sure that any promotional activities you are involved in are accurate and are not likely to mislead' (9.3)

If you use social media to advertise or share information related to your professional practice, you must make sure it is fair and true to the best of your knowledge.

Respect confidentiality

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics say...

'You must treat information about service users as confidential' (5.1)

When you post information about another person on social media, think about whether it is appropriate to share that information. If the information is confidential and/or could allow a service user to be identified, you should not put it on a site. This could include information about their personal life, health or circumstances, or images relating to their care.

Even if you have the highest level of privacy settings, something you share online can quickly be copied and redistributed to a much wider audience. This means a post can stay in the public domain after you delete it. Try to stay up to date with any changes to the privacy settings of the social media platforms you use. If you are unsure whether to post, seek advice from a friend or colleague first.

Maintain appropriate boundaries

Our standards of conduct, performance and ethics state:

'You must keep your relationships with service users and carers professional.'
(1.7)

Some professionals find social media a valuable way of communicating with service users and the public. However, social media can blur the boundaries between the personal and the professional. It is just as important to maintain appropriate boundaries when using social media as it would be if you were communicating through any other medium.

You should make sure that you always communicate with service users in a professional manner. You might decide to set up a separate professional account where you direct any contact with service users. If you are employed and plan to use this account to have direct contact with service users, you may need to agree whether this is appropriate with your employer.

If you choose to have a single account for social and work purposes, think carefully about whether you would be happy for both audiences to see the material you post. Whether you have a single account or separate accounts, always think carefully about what you post and who can see it.

If you have separate accounts or profiles, keep in mind that service users may still be able to find and contact you via your personal account. If this happens, we recommend that you politely decline a friend request or send them a separate message if appropriate.

DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

Section 4: More information

Contact us

You can contact us if you have any questions about this guidance or our standards. Please be aware, however, that we cannot offer legal advice. Our contact details are below:

The Health and Care Professions Council
Park House
184 Kennington Park Road
London
SE11 4BU.

Tel: +44 (0)300 500 6184

You can download copies of our standards documents and other publications from our website at www.hcpc-uk.org.

Other sources of guidance

We recognise the valuable role professional bodies play in representing and promoting the interests of their members. This often includes guidance and advice about good practice which can help you meet the standards that we set.

Glossary

Carer

Anyone who looks after, or provides support to, a family member, partner or friend.

Professional bodies

Organisations which promote or represent members of a profession. They may also carry out work such as providing guidance and advice, producing curriculum frameworks, overseeing post-registration education and training, and running continuing professional development programmes.

Register

A published list of health and care professionals who meet our standards. The Register is available on our website at www.hcpc-uk.org.

Registrant

A health and care professional who appears on our Register and meets our standards.

Service user

Anyone who uses or is affected by the services of registrants, for example, patients or clients.

Social media

Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, and to interact with other users. This includes websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as online forums and blogs.

Standards of conduct, performance and ethics

Standards of behaviour that we expect from health and care professionals who are registered with us.