

Guidelines for Use of Social Media

University of Pittsburgh School of Pharmacy

Introduction

Online blogs, public mailing lists, and social networking sites, including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, or Google+ (hereafter collectively referred to as social media), are tools for communication and social networking. These platforms offer opportunities for people to interact and are being used to augment personal and professional connections. The latter has become known as e-professionalism. As health care professionals, student pharmacists (acting as themselves or on behalf of student organizations) have a special responsibility to be aware of the perceptions and proper use of social media. While these sites have potential to enhance communication, their misuse may constitute professional and/or ethical misconduct. Employers are reviewing social media sites in the process of hiring to evaluate potential employees. While custom privacy options exist within social media to allow a user to control who may access certain information, unintentional access or distribution may occur. At all times, student pharmacists must be aware that the violation of legal statutes (e.g., HIPAA) and University and School policies and procedures (e.g., Code of Conduct) in their online activities may result in disciplinary actions, ranging from a letter of reprimand to probation or dismissal from the School.¹ Because these guidelines are incorporated into the Code of Conduct, any student has a duty to report any breach of these guidelines by other students.

Rationale for Guidelines on Ethical and Professional Behavior within Social Media

- Accessible social media postings, including but not limited to pictures, video, and text, are subject to the same professional standards as any other personal interaction. The written nature, persistence, and potential accessibility of these postings make them subject to particular scrutiny.
- Student pharmacists create perceptions about the School, the University, the profession of pharmacy, and themselves by identifying themselves publicly using social media. Students must assure that all public content is consistent with the values and professional standards of the School and the profession.
- Public postings on social media may have legal ramifications. Comments made by students who portray themselves, other students, faculty, or other colleagues in an unprofessional manner can be used by the courts or professional licensing boards.
- Unprofessional public postings by others on a student's social media profile can reflect poorly on the student. Students should monitor their sites and ensure that the content will not be viewed as unprofessional.

Student pharmacists MUST adhere to these standards:

- HIPAA regulations apply to all comments made on social media sites. Violators are subject to the same prosecution associated with other HIPAA violations.
- Discussions about specific patients through a social media site that is not HIPAA compliant must be avoided, even if all identifying information is excluded. It may be possible for someone to identify the patient from the context of the discussion.
- Under no circumstances is it appropriate or legal to post photos of patients or patients' body parts on social media sites without the specific written permission of the patient. This will prevent unauthorized use or sharing of the material.
- Interactions with patients about their health through a social media site that is not HIPAA compliant must be avoided. This provides numerous opportunities for violating privacy restrictions and may have legal consequences.

Professional Guidelines:

- Students should maintain the privacy of colleagues, faculty, and staff unless they have been given permission to use the person's likeness or name on their site or profile.
- Students should maintain appropriate professional boundaries when communicating through social media, recognizing appropriate limits when interacting with patients.
- Special care should be taken before posting material. Deletion of material from social media sites does not necessarily mean it is no longer accessible because search engines may cache such content.
- Students should consider minimizing personal information on social media profiles.
- Students should set their privacy settings to limit access to their personal information.
- Due to frequent updating of social media sites, it is advisable that students regularly check their privacy settings to optimize their privacy and security. See <http://www.zdnet.com/blog/igeneration/september-2011-the-definitive-facebook-lockdown-guide/12641> for more information.
- Students should ensure that photos in which they are identified ("tagged") are not inappropriate or professionally compromising. Students should "untag" themselves from any photos that they cannot have removed. Students should also refrain from "tagging" others without the explicit permission of those individuals.

References

- ¹ School of Pharmacy Code of Conduct. Available at http://wikis.pharmacy.pitt.edu/groups/pnp/wiki/c3f8c/Code_of_Conduct.html