

Online networking is raising issues related to professionalism and ethics, and even personal use of social media by physicians can prompt questions concerning privacy and confidentiality.

Whether a physician has found an audience on a micro-blogging site such as Twitter, posts videos on YouTube, connects with colleagues through LinkedIn, or blogs about health-related issues, keeping patient information confidential and secure is paramount.

The line between professional and personal is often blurry for physicians. Some Colleges have issued guidelines about the use of social media and physicians should check regularly for new policies and updates. Physicians should consider the following:

- Social media platforms should be treated as virtual public spaces, used by millions and potentially accessible by anyone¹
- Physicians who communicate through social media, on web portals, or via email should be mindful that they are governed by the same professional and ethical standards as would apply in a physical environment (e.g. hospital setting, family practice).
- The laws on defamation, copyright, and plagiarism apply equally to the web and social media as to print and verbal communication.
- Privacy legislation and licensure require that physicians guard against disclosing any information that could identify a patient. These requirements apply no matter the technology or electronic platform.
- Physicians considering the use of social media should review the policies or guidelines of their College. The Canadian Medical Association has also published guidelines entitled Social media and Canadian physicians – Issues and rules of engagement (<http://www.cma.ca/advocacy/social-media-canadian-physicians>).
- Physicians who use social media are advised to activate the strictest privacy settings whenever possible. On Facebook or LinkedIn, for example, users can adjust privacy settings within the profile sections of their pages. Remember, however, that even though privacy settings have been adjusted, confidential information should not be shared on public social sites.

The field of technology evolves rapidly, often prompting questions regarding risks and benefits. When in doubt about the use of new technologies and of social media, members should not hesitate to call the CMPA for advice or guidance.

¹ The College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia, “Social media and Online Networking Forums,” September 2010.