



UNIVERSITY
OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Medicine

Professionalism Online - guidelines for the appropriate use of the internet, electronic networking, and other forms of electronic communication

Background:

Online and electronic communication offers unique opportunities to facilitate learning, to promote communication between learners, teachers, and administrators, and for learners to provide and receive support. At the same time these forms of communication can lead to breaches of patient confidentiality, facilitate harassment, blur appropriate boundaries, and damage the reputation of learners, faculty and staff in the Faculty of Medicine. These guidelines will provide clarity and direction to learners, faculty, and administration regarding what is acceptable behavior. This policy will apply to all learners, faculty and staff in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Manitoba.

Key Principles:

A) Academic freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental values supported by the University of Manitoba faculty of medicine.

B) There are a number of laws, standards, and regulations that apply to learners, faculty and staff in the faculty of medicine because they are members of the university community and have responsibilities to their professional colleges and associations. Many of these existing laws, standards, and regulations relate to online behavior and so they constitute a firm foundation for what is acceptable (and unacceptable) online behavior. (Appendix A contains a summary of relevant laws, professional standards, University of Manitoba policies, and Faculty of Medicine regulations)

C) All individuals must assume personal responsibility for information they post online or send electronically. Even though an individual may send an e-mail message or post material online with the intent that it remain private, communications may be copied and passed on to individuals other than the intended recipient, and materials posted to social networking sites may end up being viewed by the general public. Individuals must also assume personal responsibility for the decision to further distribute or post information that is sent to them, or that they find online. (Appendix B contains guidelines regarding online etiquette and appropriate online behaviors)

1) Learners, faculty and staff must not transmit or post personal health information:

One of the core legal, ethical, and professional obligations that all have an obligation to patients/clients is to maintain their personal health information as confidential. There are many forms of online or electronic communication that may undermine this obligation. Examples include blogging about specific patient encounters, posting patient information (including information about deceased patients or cadavers) on a social networking site, or including a patient's personal health information in e-mail messages. These activities may breach provincial privacy laws and do not meet general standards for professional behavior. (See appendix A)

Certain online activities in which a limited amount of clinical information is shared in an anonymized way may be acceptable. This may include writing a case report for publication, or seeking information from a colleague or teacher regarding a clinical case.

2) Learners, faculty and staff must not transmit or post material that is considered to be discriminatory or harassing in nature:

Any time individuals communicate there is the potential for misunderstanding. This risk is higher with online communication as the opportunity to understand the context of a message, and to obtain immediate feedback is generally not present. In some cases, online communication may be interpreted by the viewer (who may or may not be the intended recipient) as offensive or constituting discrimination or harassment.

In Manitoba the Human Rights Code prohibits unreasonable discrimination which is based on group characteristics such as ancestry, nationality, ethnic origin, religion, age, sex, pregnancy and other gender determined characteristics, sexual orientation, marital or family status, source of income, political belief and physical or mental disability. Examples of online activity that may be seen as discriminatory include posting a message to a discussion forum disparaging groups of people or certain kinds of individuals, or posting videos that mock or disparage specific groups on video sites such as.

The University of Manitoba defines harassment as "...behaviour that humiliates, intimidates, excludes and isolates an individual or group, but is not based on one of the Manitoba Human Rights Code's prohibited grounds of discrimination. Personal harassment is objectionable and unwelcome comments or actions directed towards a specific target which serve no legitimate work or academic related purpose and have the effect of creating an intimidating, humiliating, hostile or offensive environment."

Examples of online behavior that may be interpreted as harassment include sending unwanted e-mail messages to others, writing disparaging comments about peers or teachers on discussion forums, or posting embarrassing or inappropriate pictures of others on a social networking site.

3) Learners, faculty and staff must not transmit or post material that undermines the academic integrity of the University.

The University of Manitoba clearly states in its policy on academic integrity that learners who engage in any form of plagiarism, cheating, or inappropriate collaboration may face significant academic penalties. Examples of online behavior that may contravene this policy include; accessing online resources during an exam or for assignments where this is not permitted, presenting material that is obtained online as original work, and sharing exam questions or other evaluation tools with other learners unless explicit permission has been granted to do so.

4) Learners, faculty and staff must abide by the same professional standards when communicating electronically as they would if communicating in person.

There are time when an individual who is sending a message electronically or posting material online does not follow the same rules of social interaction and/or basic etiquette they would in a face-to-face encounter. Some reasons for this are that the individual may feel (or believe themselves to be) anonymous, the context of the communication is different than a personal interaction, and online/texting communication tends to be less formal than other forms of professional and business interactions. However all learners must recognize that online/texting communication is not anonymous - virtually all online and other electronic networking activities can be tracked and traced. While electronic communication may be less formal there are important standards for professional behaviour and communication that apply to electronic online interactions in the same way they apply to personal communications.

a) With patients/clients – There are clear professional guidelines that prohibit certain types of interactions with patients/clients. These would include sexual or sexualized comments and other types of interactions that may be interpreted as an attempt to take advantage of the provider-patient/client relationship for personal gain. So in the same way that sexual comments to a patient in the office or hospital would constitute a breach of professional standards, online communication with a patient/client that was inappropriately sexual (including sharing photos, in “chat” rooms, etc.) would be a breach of one’s professional responsibilities.

There is a further group of online activities that may not breach professional standards but still lead to a blurring of the boundaries between a learner/professional and their patient/client. One should engage in these activities cautiously and be aware of the potential problems that may arise. Some examples include becoming a “Facebook friend” with a patient, or joining a discussion group which has one’s patients as members of the online community. While learners, faculty and staff should be encouraged to maintain appropriate boundaries there are situations in which they may find boundaries blurred through no fault of their own and where there is no intention to take advantage of a patient/client. For example an individual who is already a “Facebook friend” of the

professional may become ill, and then becomes a patient/client of the professional. In these situations the professional still needs to be aware of the challenges that may arise.

b) With peers – Professional standards dictate that health-care providers should not criticize one another in public. This can be assumed to include online discussion groups and websites. This should not preclude providers from communicating directly with each other if there are concerns over the clinical care that is being provided, and if there is a consistent pattern of sub-standard care then the relevant college must also be notified. Outside of the clinical realm, any online communication that the recipient feels is humiliating or intimidating may meet the University’s definition of harassment.

c) With supervisors and teachers – Supervisors and teachers have the responsibility to evaluate learners and the power to promote them and facilitate their ongoing academic success, or to delay or block their progress. This power differential creates a potential for abuse that is similar to the relationship that exists between providers and patients/clients. Clearly it is the teacher/supervisor’s responsibility to insure they are not taking advantage of learners. However learners should also be aware of some of the challenges that may arise if appropriate boundaries between a learner and their teacher are blurred. For example if a learner asks a teacher to be a “Facebook friend” this may lead to sharing of inappropriate information and/or charges of favoritism if not all students share the same status or have the same access to the teacher.

d) With administration and support staff – In the university setting, and in many departments and residency programs, administrative staff have access to private material concerning learners, faculty and staff, and may have power over important decisions regarding learners. (I.e. timing of vacations, scheduling of rotations, etc.) This creates a power-differential similar to that between learners and teachers and gives rise to similar concerns regarding boundary blurring. Administrative staff, faculty and learners should be aware of the potential for boundary blurring and either avoid this or mitigate the potentially negative effects. There are also tales of learners and faculty who communicate in an appropriate and polite manner with a department head or program director, then communicate in a rude and inappropriate manner with support staff. This type of communication (whether online or in person) may be considered harassment by the university and will earn an individual a poor reputation that can follow them for a long time.

e) With the public – When communicating with members of the public learners. Faculty and staff must remember they have a responsibility to abide by the standards of their profession, and the standards of the faculty and university whether they are communicating as an official spokesperson, speaking simply as a member of the profession, or even if they are not identified as a member of their profession at all. This means they have a responsibility to state when their opinions are different from those of the majority of the profession, and maintain certain standards of conduct and decorum.

5) Learners, faculty and staff should avoid transmitting or posting material that may adversely affect their personal reputation and the reputation of the faculty and the university.

There are a number of online activities that may not clearly contravene university regulations or professional standards and yet they do not present the individual's involved (or the Faculty of Medicine) in the best light. Some examples of these activities include pictures posted to social networking sites showing excessive drinking or lewd behavior. Learners, faculty and staff should be aware of how these types of activities can impact upon their future opportunities. (I.e. many residency program directors, Department Heads and Senior Administrators now search social networking sites to see if applicants to their programs have this kind of material posted) Since these activities also reflect upon the Faculty of Medicine, the University and the individual's profession, a faculty member who posts this kind of material may be asked to remove or modify it.

6) Learners, faculty and staff must not use university property for personal gain

The university logo, property, and resources are not to be used by members of the University for Personal Financial Gain. While this may be less of an issue for learners than for faculty and staff, learners should still be aware that online activities that use the university's resources or reputation in an attempt to accrue personal financial gain contravene university regulations and may result in legal action being taken against the individual.

Appendix A

This appendix is a summary of existing provincial legislation, professional standards, University of Manitoba policies, and Faculty of Medicine regulations that are relevant to online communication by learners.

Relevant laws and legal considerations:

The most serious problems regarding online and other electronic communication are those where a law may have been broken or some form of legal liability or human rights complaint may result.

The Personal Health Information Act (PHIA) outlines responsibilities that any one who collects personal health information must abide by. All health care providers including learners take a PHIA pledge and are considered trustees under PHIA. There is also federal privacy legislation (PIPEDA) that may be relevant. A health-care provider who divulges confidential information may also be held liable for a breach of the fiduciary duty of confidentiality.

In Manitoba the Human Rights Code prohibits unreasonable discrimination which is based on group characteristics such as ancestry, nationality, ethnic origin, religion, age, sex, pregnancy and other gender determined characteristics, sexual orientation, marital or family status, source of income, political belief and physical or mental disability.

Professional standards:

For Physicians, medical students and Physician Assistant students, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Manitoba (CPSM) is their governing body. The College has a code of conduct as well as a number of statements and guidelines that are relevant to online communication.

The CPSM Code of Conduct contains such statements as:

Consider first the well-being of the patient (article 1) and Treat all patients with respect; do not exploit them for personal advantage (article 2) It also has an entire section on Confidentiality (articles 24-26) and outlines responsibilities to society (31-37) and to the profession (41-48). These sections outline a number of responsibilities for the members of the College; if expressing a scientific or medical opinion that is not generally held by the rest of the profession they must clearly identify this as being the case,(37) avoid impugning the reputation of a colleague for personal motives,(43) enter into associations only if they can maintain their professional integrity,(45(a)) and avoid promoting a service or product for personal gain.(46) Other relevant CPSM statements (No 124 Conflict of Interest, No 104 Medical Computer Systems: Security and Self-Audit) and guidelines (No 109 Transmission of Health Information by Electronic Means, Cellular and Cordless Phones, and No 115 physicians and the Media) reiterate and reinforce the principles identified above.

Physiotherapists Students in the Physiotherapy program are members of the College of Physiotherapists of Manitoba. As a self-regulated profession physiotherapists have a Code of Ethics which outlines their professional standards. The Manitoba College of Physiotherapy Code of Ethics contains a number of sections that are relevant to online communication. Among these are section 1.7 which discusses “Confidentiality and release of information”, section 1.8 that covers “Personal Boundaries”, section 1.11 on “Collegiality” and section 3.2 – “Advertising and promotional activities.”

Students in the Occupational Therapy program are technically not members of the College of Occupational Therapists of Manitoba (they qualify for membership after graduation) but are required to follow the College of Occupational Therapists of Manitoba Code of Ethics and are expected to follow the same professional standards set out for their supervising therapists. The College of Occupational Therapists of Manitoba Code of Ethics identifies core values, a number of which may be particularly relevant to online communication. They include; Accountability, (“Occupational therapists are fully responsible for their practice and are able to account for their actions.”) Competent, Caring and Ethical services, Trusting and Respectful Practice Environment, and Confidentiality and Privacy.

Respiratory Therapists and Students in the Respiratory Therapy program are student members of the Manitoba Association of Registered Respiratory Therapists (MARRT) but are not licensed. The MARRT has a Code of Ethics, and standards of practice which outline the professional expectations of their members. Elements of the Code of Ethics that may relate to online communication include a section outlining the importance of confidentiality and another section which states “Each member of this Association shall conduct himself in such a manner so as to gain the respect and confidence of other Health Care personnel, as well as respecting the human dignity of his associates.” The standards of practice that are most relevant are standard 5 – “Respiratory therapists will interact and communicate professionally and effectively in carrying out their responsibilities” and standard 8 – “Respiratory therapists will comply with ethical and legal requirements in the practice of their profession”

Graduate Students in the Faculty of Medicine do not have a specific body or college which sets standards or outlines expected professional behaviors. They should be aware of professional guidelines or standards that apply to their supervisors if their supervisor is a member of a health-care profession or an academic instructor. An important additional resource that does not constitute a professional standard but which clearly outlines and discusses what is appropriate (and inappropriate) ethical behavior for graduate students at the University of Manitoba is the online Graduate Ethics Training Module that has been posted in a draft form on the Faculty of Graduate Studies webpage.

[http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/GET_content_2009_\(draft\)-v4.pdf](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/GET_content_2009_(draft)-v4.pdf)
(accessed on Feb 05, 2010)

It has a number of learning modules that all may be relevant to online activity and specific advice regarding appropriate online activities and behaviour.

Institutional and Faculty Policies:

University of Manitoba Policies.

There are a number of University of Manitoba policies that are relevant to online communication and electronic activities:

1) Use of Computer Facilities

Learners and University members at the U of M agree to abide by this policy when they claim a user ID. The policy outlines clear user responsibilities including to:

- “(a) Use resources only for authorized purposes as defined by the University;
- (b) Protect their userid (is the access word assigned to each user of the University systems by IST) password and system from unauthorized use. Users are responsible for all activities on their userid that originate from their system with their knowledge.
- (c) Access only information that is their own, that is publicly available or to which they have been explicitly granted access by the owner of the information;
- (d) Comply with local, provincial and federal laws;
- (e) Comply with system security mechanisms;
- (f) Use only legally licensed versions of copyrighted software or copies of documents and media in compliance with terms and conditions of any vendor licensing agreement, copyright or sale terms and conditions;
- (g) Comply with all University policies regarding intellectual property;
- (h) Ensure that systems under their control have current security updates and anti-virus software installed regardless of ownership of the equipment;
- (i) Engage in ethical workplace behaviors reflecting:
 - (i) Academic honesty;
 - (ii) Acceptable language of discourse;
 - (iii) restraint in the consumption of shared resources by refraining from monopolizing systems and/or overloading networks with excessive data or activity, degrading services, or wasting any other related resource;
 - (iv) Respect for intellectual property and ownership of data; and
 - (v) Respect for individual rights to privacy and freedom from harassment in such forms as intimidating, disrespectful or obscene messages, jokes or images.”

2) Respectful Work and Learning Environment

In part this policy states:

“The University of Manitoba does not condone behaviour that is likely to undermine the dignity, self-esteem or productivity of any of its members and prohibits any form of discrimination or harassment whether it occurs on University property or in conjunction with University-related activities. Therefore, the University of Manitoba is committed to an inclusive and respectful work and learning environment, free from: (a) discrimination or harassment as prohibited in the Manitoba Human Rights Code ;□(b) sexual harassment; and□(c) personal harassment”

The policy outlines the structures that exist at the University to help address these issues and identifies a range of penalties (from reprimand to dismissal and expulsion) that may be applied depending upon the seriousness of the incident.

3) Inappropriate or disruptive student behavior

This policy defines inappropriate or disruptive student behavior as... “Behaviour which persistently interferes with the academic or administrative activities of the University (and/or) which inhibits the ability of other students to learn and of instructors to teach.”

The policy recognizes that the majority of students who engage in this behavior will do so rarely, will accept personal responsibility when confronted, and will voluntarily accept counseling or other appropriate interventions.

4) Academic Integrity

This policy outlines the expectation that students will submit original work and will not subvert the evaluation process through such activities as obtaining or sharing privileged information, cheating on an examination, or impersonating another individual.

Faculty of Medicine Policies

There are also Faculty of Medicine policies that are relevant to online communication. Medical students receive a Curriculum Guide that outlines the expectations the faculty and the profession have regarding their professional behaviors. All medical students take the Hippocratic Oath and receive a copy of the University of Manitoba Charter as well as Guidelines for Undergraduates – Faculty of Medicine Conduct for the Profession.

1) University of Manitoba Charter:

To practice personal and academic integrity;

To respect the dignity and individuality of all persons;

To respect the rights and property of others;

To take responsibility for one's own personal and academic commitments;

To contribute to our community for fair, cooperative and honest inquiry and learning;

To respect and strive to learn from differences in people ideas and opinions;

To refrain from and discourage behaviours which threaten the freedom and respect every individual deserves.

There are no clear guidelines associated with this charter and no penalties are specified if the charter is not followed.

2) The Guidelines for Undergraduates - Faculty of Medicine Conduct for the Profession. These offer specific guidance regarding the behavior that is expected of undergraduate medical students. They are not copied here as they are currently under revision. While none of them speaks directly to online activity they do cover a number of areas (such as academic honesty and integrity, considering first the well-being of the patient, and others) that would be very relevant to a variety of online activity.

The Curriculum Guide reminds students of the following:

“That a standard of professional behaviour is expected of students is clear from the University of Manitoba Undergraduate Calendar, Faculty of Medicine, Section 2.1 General Regulations. "The Faculty Executive Council reserves the right to require any student to withdraw from the program for which the student is enrolled when it believes the student to be unsuited, on general considerations of scholarship, or conduct for the profession, or the field within the profession, to which the program of studies normally leads. This right prevails notwithstanding any other provision in the faculty regulations.””

Appendix B

Privacy and Etiquette Guidelines for Online Activity

The following is an excerpt from guidelines regarding social networking and privacy published by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada. (the bold emphasis has been added) They can be found at:

http://www.priv.gc.ca/fs-fi/02_05_d_35_sn_e.cfm (accessed Feb 05, 2010)

We would also like to acknowledge the University of Saskatchewan policy: “Guidelines for Faculty and Students using Internet Social Networking in the Academic Context at the University of Saskatchewan” which brought this resource to our attention.

1) **Never expect absolute privacy.** Know what you’re getting into by reading the privacy statement and policies. Many sites allow all registered users to view all the information you post on your site with no exceptions.

2) Before you join a site and post your profile, find out if you can join a closed network, where only those with an email address from your school can register, for example. **Find out if the site allows others to see your profile without your consent.**

3) **Choose the highest and most restrictive security setting available** and do not give out information like your birthday, full name, phone number, Social Insurance Number or address.

4) Take a second to think about what you’re posting about yourself and your friends. Is it something you would post if your professor, boss, kid sister or arch rival was standing right behind you? **Even though we tend to think about our personal sites as private, in reality, many can be seen by just about anyone.** Is there information about you that is embarrassing or that fraudsters could use? **Remember that what you post could be online forever.**

Keep in mind that even sites with extensive privacy options may be required to make your personal information available to certain authorized persons, including law enforcement agencies.

The following guidelines regarding online communication are from the book Netiquette by Virginia Shea. This book has been published online by Albion.com and the contents are available at <http://www.albion.com/netiquette/index.html> (accessed Feb 05, 2010)

The following core rules of Netiquette are published at:

<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html> (accessed Feb 05, 2010)

(in the web version each rule is expanded upon and discussed in greater detail)

- 1) Remember the human.
- 2) Adhere to the same standards of behaviour online that you follow in real life.
- 3) Know where you are in cyberspace.
- 4) Respect other people's time and bandwidth.
- 5) Make yourself look good online.
- 6) Share expert knowledge.
- 7) Help keep flame wars under control.
- 8) Respect other people's privacy.
- 9) Don't abuse your power.
- 10) Be forgiving of other people's mistakes