



**FACULTY OF
PUBLIC HEALTH**

Social media guidance for FPH officers, representatives and members engaged on FPH business

Introduction

Social media has become a major means of communicating with a wide range of audiences. The Faculty of Public Health (FPH) uses it to communicate its messages, interact with members and advocate on public health issues. Currently, we are on Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest, and have a blog, *Better health for all*.

There are many benefits to using social media. Information can be instantly communicated to a wider audience – from members to the media, politicians to the public. However, with the ability to readily communicate, also comes risk. Social media is public and instant, and once information is out there, even if it is subsequently deleted, it may still be held somewhere on the internet.

A growing number of FPH members also use social media – as evidenced by the Tweets from our annual conference and EGM. Some FPH officers and staff also have personal social media accounts.

The distinction between what an individual posts online in a personal (or ‘private’) capacity and how this relates to their professional (ie. ‘public’) persona is becoming increasingly blurred. What we may say in a personal capacity has the potential to reflect not only on our own reputation and professional standing, but on that of any organisation we might work for, represent or be affiliated to.

This short guide sets out some key principles, for officers, staff and others appointed on FPH business, on using social media.

Existing guidance

There are a number of key guidance documents which provide excellent advice on using social media.

- General Medical Council (GMC) – *Doctors’ use of social media*. Currently a draft for consultation, but provides useful information.
- British Medical Association (BMA) – *using social media: practical and ethical guidance for doctors and medical students*.
- Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) – *Social Media Highway Code*. Ten key ‘rules’ for using social media in a sensible way.

Whilst primarily aimed at doctors, the principles underpinning the guidance have relevance to anyone using social media.

Synthesising information from the above documents, this policy sets out some of the key principles to support you in using social media, and highlights those issues to consider when posting views, opinions and information online.

Key principles

- Your online presence – even in a personal capacity – will shape how people perceive you – both personally and professionally, and may even also reflect on any organisation you work for or are affiliated to (for example, as an FPH officer). Be clear about whether you are commenting personally or professionally, and/or in relation to FPH work. Try to keep them separate wherever possible (though this is no guarantee that what you say personally won’t reflect on how people perceive you professionally).
- Information, including images, pictures and/or videos, posted online, even if subsequently deleted, could still be available indefinitely somewhere else. For example, if someone has copied the post, Retweeted or downloaded it on to their computer. A good rule of thumb is, if in any doubt, don’t post, upload or Tweet it. If it relates to FPH business, check with the relevant members of staff at FPH. **Be sure of your facts before you post anything online.**
- Make yourself familiar with the privacy settings for whatever medium you are using. The BMA recommend consideration of adopting “conservative privacy settings” where available. This does not guarantee the protection of all content you post; you should therefore be aware, at all times, of who may have access to your information.
- Use of a pseudonym is no guarantee of anonymity. Posts, blogs and tweets can all generally be traced back to the originator.

- Always treat others with respect and consideration. Avoid allowing the anonymity of social media to change how you communicate: use the same friendly and professional tone of voice in your social media conversations, particularly with strangers, as you would during a face-to-face work-related conversation. The immediacy of social media makes it easy to respond to a negative comment in a defensive, knee-jerk way. A good rule of thumb for dealing with critical or ‘trolling’ messages is to take a deep breath, and if you think appropriate, reply once in a calm tone and move on. If a message is offensive, abusive or threatening check the operator/host’s guidelines and, if appropriate, report it to them.
- Don’t post offensive, derogatory, defamatory, comments, remarks or views, or information which may affect the rights of others. Be aware of defamatory laws and libel laws. Defamation law can apply to comments posted either personally or professionally.
- Be aware of any ethical obligation to declare conflicts of interest (for example, doctors who may have obligations under GMC regulations).
- When posting images, pictures and/or videos be aware of how they may potentially be used by others. If they are not originally created by you, give consideration to issues of copyright and fair use. Seek permission first to reuse the image/video from the originator if you are in any doubt. Again, be aware that even if you remove an image or picture, they may still exist somewhere else on the web or on someone’s computer.
- As an FPH officer/representative, public health professional and/or member of staff your opinion will carry weight. Journalists may also be following what you say. If you are approached by a journalist about your work as an FPH Officer/representative/ member of staff, or about anything which you think may impact on FPH, contact the FPH Media Office as soon as possible on 020 7935 3115.
- It is important to maintain professional boundaries. The GMC and RCGP guidance advises that for individuals who are contacted by members of the public, or their patients, asking for medical advice, that they should politely and sensitively refer them to the appropriate place for medical advice eg. NHS Direct or their local GP practice. The BMA also recommend not accepting ‘friends’ requests from patients. It is also important to respect and abide by confidentiality rules and to never disclose patient information, even if you think it is not identifiable.
- Using social media can be fun, enjoyable and engaging. As the RCGP guidance states: “remaining professional does not mean you can’t allow your personality, passion or sense of humour to show through.”

Public health professionals must follow those obligations and requirements set out in the relevant professional guidelines and codes of conduct produced by their regulatory bodies.

FPH officers and representatives should also follow those obligations and requirements set out in any relevant FPH guidance, including the Trustees Handbook.

FPH staff should be aware of the requirements set out in the FPH staff handbook on professional conduct.

If there is a particular issue you think FPH should be engaging on through social media, contact the Health Policy and Advocacy Team on 020 3696 1452.

Useful resources

British Medical Association – *Using social media: practical and ethical guidance for doctors and medical students*. Accessible from:

http://www.medschools.ac.uk/SiteCollectionDocuments/social_media_guidance_may2011.pdf

General Medical Council – *Doctors' use of social media*. Currently a draft for consultation, but provides useful information. Accessible from: [http://www.gmc-](http://www.gmc-uk.org/Draft_explanatory_guidance___Doctors_use_of_social_media.pdf_48499903.pdf)

[uk.org/Draft_explanatory_guidance___Doctors_use_of_social_media.pdf_48499903.pdf](http://www.gmc-uk.org/Draft_explanatory_guidance___Doctors_use_of_social_media.pdf_48499903.pdf)

General Medical Council – *Good medical practice*. Accessible from: [http://www.gmc-](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/good_medical_practice.asp)

[uk.org/guidance/good_medical_practice.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/good_medical_practice.asp)

Royal College of General Practitioners – *Social media highway code*. Ten key 'rules' for using social media in a sensible way. Accessible from: <http://www.rcgp.org.uk/~media/Files/Policy/A-Z-policy/RCGP-Social-Media-Highway-Code.ashx>

UK Public Health Register – *Code of conduct*. Accessible from:

<http://www.publichealthregister.org.uk/node/206>

Produced by:

Faculty of Public Health

4 St Andrew's Place

London NW1 4LB

e: policy@fph.org.uk

w: www.fph.org.uk

Registered Charity No: 263894

This guidance will be kept under review and amended to ensure that latest advice is reflected in its contents.