

Ethics and Social Media: They Aren't Mutually Exclusive!

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Social media can be a powerful way to communicate with patients/clients and the public. APTA recognizes the value of providing evidence-based information about the profession and the movement system through social media and uses a variety of sites including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube channels. Many hospitals, physical therapy practices, and individual physical therapy practitioners recognize the benefit of providing information through professional sites as well. As PTs and PTAs engage in use of social media for professional and personal use, it is imperative that they are aware of ways social media can impact their careers, both positively and negatively. Whether on professional or personal sites, therapists who use social media must adhere to the highest standards of professionalism when providing and sharing information. They must recognize that the inherent worth in using social media is to convey accurate, timely, and meaningful information that meets the expectations and needs of patients while maintaining patient privacy and confidentiality. Physical therapists and physical therapist assistants alike must also recognize that use of social media in healthcare presents potential risks and ramifications. This can be seen when professional use violates inherent patient rights, or when personal use paints a picture of the therapist that is less than professional. Therefore, it is imperative that healthcare professionals remain cognizant of their professional and ethical obligations while engaging in social media to protect their professional image and the public.

The APTA has resources available to assist PTs and PTAs with navigating social media. APTA's *"Standard of Conduct in Use of Social Media"*¹ states that PTs, PTAs and physical therapy students are obligated to adhere to the *Code of Ethics* for the Physical Therapist and the *Standards of Ethical Conduct for the Physical Therapist Assistant* while engaging in social media. Principles/Standards of the Code and Standards applying to the usage of social media include Principle/Standard #4 which states that PTs and PTAs shall demonstrate integrity in their relationships with the patients/clients, families, colleagues, students, research participants, other health care providers, employers, payers and the public. Principle/Standard 4A further states that PTs and PTAs shall provide truthful, accurate and relevant information and shall not make misleading representations.^{2,3} This ethical obligation applies to posting information on social media platforms. Health information posted on sites should be accurate, quality information that is not misleading to the public. Additionally, PTs and PTAs should consider the blurring of personal and professional lives. Postings to a personal social media profile can be viewed by others as professional opinions.

The APTA document, *"Succeeding (and Protecting Yourself) in Social Media"*⁴ discusses that despite the use of disclaimers, even personal posts can still be interpreted as representing your professional opinion and/or the opinion of an affiliated party or place of employment. Therefore, PTs and PTAs should clearly state whether they are speaking for themselves or for another party (employer, APTA, etc) in order to avoid misrepresentation. In the article, *"Professionalism in a Digital Age"* Gagnon et al reported⁵ that health care providers are encouraged to "practice professionalism online as they would offline" in all personal and professional social media platforms. The creation of separate personal and professional accounts does not create clear boundaries. "Professionals should consider that the increasing accessibility and "searchability" of the Internet limit the ability to compartmentalize a person's public and personal online presence."⁵

Social media can also create situations which would apply to Principle/Standard 2 which states the ethical obligation to protect patient confidential information.^{2,3} With the extensive outreaching of social networks, information that may not intentionally reveal a patient's identity can be used to discover the patient's identity and in return threaten the patient's privacy. Also, Principle/Standard 1 may apply to certain scenarios involving social media. This Principle/Standard states the PT/PTA shall respect the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals and shall act in a respectful manner toward each person.^{2,3} Social media should not be used to discuss patients, colleagues or others in a disparaging manner. This action may be damaging to a professional reputation and decrease public confidence in the profession of physical therapy.

When using any form of social media, whether it be iPads, tablets, "apps," e-mail, and platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter, therapists must recognize potential legal ramifications related to patient/client privacy and confidentiality. Therapists must follow acceptable legal guidelines, including those spelled out in HIPAA regulations. This is also addressed through Principle/Standard 4C, which states that PTs/PTAs should discourage misconduct by healthcare professional and report illegal or unethical acts to the appropriate authorities.^{2,3} This would include violations of privacy and other misuses of social media. This concept is also reflected in the APTA's *Standards of Conduct for Use of Social Media*, which also recognizes that PTs and PTAs have the ethical obligation to report illegal or unethical usage of social media.¹

The following are some general recommendations for therapists when using social media platforms including Facebook, or when using iPads, tablets, "apps", or e-mail, to communicate with and educate patients and the public:

- Always ask for patient permission
- When using platforms or "apps", determine what the vendor does to comply with HIPAA recommendations
- Any app should be password protected and HIPAA compliant
- iPads, laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc. must be sealed and secured and HIPAA compliant
- Encryption is recommended for e-mail communication. Providers e-mail system should meet the security requirements of HIPAA, including an adequate level of encryption

In conclusion, social media, e-mail, "apps", and other platforms provide therapists with powerful means to communicate valuable information to patients and the public. However, they must be used with the highest standards of professionalism that adheres to both ethical and legal standards of practice.

The PPTA Ethics Committee welcomes inquiries and remarks about social media and ethics. We also encourage members, non-members, and the public to take advantage of the consultative and educational services that the Committee provides. Additionally, we welcome comments on our publications and presentations, and encourage individuals to make recommendations for topics they would like to see addressed in the future.

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