

Factsheet

Unite in Health guide to using/ navigating social media (and not getting into trouble)



(N.B. All websites were visited on 16th July 2014)

Abstract

'Everyone' is using 'social media' now. For many it's a way of communicating that brings lots of benefits. However as with anything, there are risks associated with its use. This briefing paper gives some basic advice and guidance to our members who work in the health sector related to their use of social media. It doesn't go in to detail about any specific service or how to use those services.

Background

Social media is the social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. It is also the 'catch all' term that covers the many different services that have been developed since 1994ⁱ. The current most popular and most often mentioned include Facebook (with 1.23bn monthly users world-wideⁱⁱ) and Twitter (255 million monthly users world-wideⁱⁱⁱ).

Social media in the NHS

When social media was relatively new NHS and other health organisations often had policies that discouraged or flatly banned its use during work time or mentioning work whilst away from the ward, clinic or office. Over time this approach has changed and now staff^{iv} can even be encouraged to use social media as part of their daily working lives. It has been recognised as bringing many different benefits to health care staff including:

- Supporting patients and clients with knowledge about their service/condition/treatment.
- Helping staff to stay in touch with new developments in the world of health care^v.
- Reducing isolation and helping to form supportive communities of practice.

Many organisations have developed resources that support health care workers to use social media both in their work and home lives. Some of these have been included in the 'further resources' section.

What not to do

- **Break your professional code:** Many of our members, as well as having a contract of employment, will also be registered with one of the nine healthcare professional regulators. It may be that social media is not explicitly described in your professional code, however there are areas that are that could be contravened by its inappropriate use, for example ensuring clients confidentiality is maintained. There have been a number of cases that have gone before regulators regarding social media where registrants have faced sanctions, including 'striking off orders' for their misuse of social media. As time passes, regulators are also more likely to explicitly state social media in their code. Do keep up to date with what your regulator says!
- **Talk about client's/patients on social media:** Members need to carefully consider any information that they share on

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social media sites and ensure that it does not break any client's explicit right to confidentiality. Members need to remember that even if security is set high on social media sites, information shared should be considered to have been put in the public domain.

- **Defame your employer or fellow colleagues:** In members terms and conditions of employment there will be explicit requirements to not defame your employer or fellow colleagues. As we've already highlighted, information placed on social media is in the public domain. However tempting, it should not be the route used to air personal grievances, complaints or concerns. Also, you must respect your colleagues' privacy, and not upload photographs of them at the staff party, stag party or 'girls' night out' which could in any way show them in a non-professional light. The best way to avoid this is to ask permission before taking photos of colleagues, and again before uploading them onto social media.
- **Think that what you say on social media is completely private:** Different social media services have different options and abilities to limit the way your posts are shared. It's important to understand how the settings work for the services that you use. Irrespective of this, however, confidential information must not be included on services unless clearly sanctioned by your employer. You must start from the assumption that everything you write could be seen by anyone.
- **Engage in inappropriate relationships via social media with clients who are in your care:** Professionals have a duty not to take advantage of clients by developing relationships in an inappropriate manner. This remains true on social media sites and so members must ensure that they conform with requirements laid out via their professional code or local work place policy.
- **Blur the distinction between work and home-life too far:** Social media is now being more and more accessed using smart phones. This can lead to the effect of blurring the difference between work's time and personal time. Employers may raise concerns if they believe that members are using work's time to engage in social media. Also if you do use social media for work, do consider whether it is appropriate to also put personal information on these. There have been some examples of where teachers have had difficulty in this regard^{vi}.

Some messages for Unite the union workplace representatives

- **Using social media can be an effective tool in organising, recruitment and campaigning:** As a Unite the union rep, social media can be a tool that could benefit members locally. Also as a rep there are legal protections in place to raise concerns and social media may be an effective way to do this. However, it's important to consider what messages are being posted and if you're unsure, get further advice from your regional officer. If in doubt, check! It might be that instead of sharing information yourself, we, at Unite can do this on your behalf. We've also written a more detailed guide '*Unite guide to campaigning on the web*^{vii}' which is linked to in the 'further resources' section.
- **Talk to your employer about having a social media policy:** It's better for employees to know what's expected of them and you can play a big part in this. If your employer doesn't already have a policy in place, talk to them about developing this. NHS Employers has a tool kit^{viii} with advice on how this can be done. If there is a policy locally, make sure you've read it and consider whether it needs to be reviewed. Also talk to your employer about any training that might be important to provide to staff members to ensure they know about, understand and apply the policy.
- **Support members to understand their responsibilities:** You can share this fact sheet with members and encourage them to review their current practice to see if they need to change anything. It's better to avert problems before they happen.
- **Learn with Unite:** Some of our members won't have lots of experience of working with computers let alone using social media sites. Unite the union has a free resource for members which includes basic IT courses. You can access these via: www.learnwithunite.org.
- **Look at developing your own training locally for Unite members and reps:** If you're not sure how to go about doing this, contact your regional officer or the health sector office nationally.

Further resources

- Unite in Health has a number of social media profiles that we'd encourage members to follow/engage with. You can find a collection of our Twitter feeds at: <https://twitter.com/UniteinHealth/uniteinhealth-tweeters/members>
- Unite in Health Thinking Thursday, Think Again: We carried out an online webinar that talked about social media. You can listen to this on #UiHTT *Think Again* at www.unitetheunion.org/UiHTT.
- Unite the union '*Unite guide to campaigning on the web*': www.unitetheunion.org/uploaded/documents/6197_GuideToWebCampaigning_411-14848.pdf
- NHS Employers social media toolkit: www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/a-social-media-toolkit-for-the-nhs
- NHS Employers collection of guides from regulators and professional bodies: www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/social-media-guidelines

References

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- iii <https://about.twitter.com/company>
- iv www.theguardian.com/healthcare-network/2011/feb/16/nhs-twitter-use-tweets-communication-healthcare
- v www.england.nhs.uk/2013/10/29/clare-helm/
- vi www.theguardian.com/education/2012/jan/23/teacher-misconduct-cases-facebook
- vii www.unitetheunion.org/uploaded/documents/6197_GuideToWebCampaigning_411-14848.pdf
- viii www.nhsemployers.org/your-workforce/need-to-know/social-media-and-the-nhs/a-social-media-toolkit-for-the-nhs

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