Nursing & Midwifery Council

Guidance on using social media responsibly



We are the nursing and midwifery regulator for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- We exist to protect the health and wellbeing of the public.
- We set the standards of education, training and conduct and performance so that nurses and midwives can deliver high quality healthcare consistently throughout their careers.
- We make sure that nurses and midwives keep their skills and knowledge up to date and uphold our professional standards.
- We have clear and transparent processes to investigate nurses and midwives who fall short of our standards.

This guidance should be read together with *The Code: Professional standards of practice and behaviour for nurses and midwives* (the Code) (NMC, 2015).

Nurses and midwives should refer to this guidance along with any guidance issued by their employer on social media.

This guidance is not intended to cover every social media situation that you may face, however it sets out broad principles to enable you to think through issues and act professionally, ensuring public protection at all times.

As the nature and scope of social media is constantly evolving, we will review this guidance as necessary and reapply the principles of the Code to new situations that emerge.

Introduction

If used responsibly and appropriately, social networking sites can offer several benefits for nurses, midwives and students. These include:

- building and maintaining professional relationships;
- establishing or accessing nursing and midwifery support networks and being able to discuss specific issues, interests, research and clinical experiences with other healthcare professionals globally; and
- being able to access resources for continuing professional development (CPD).

This document provides guidance for nurses and midwives on how to use social media[1] and social networking[2] sites responsibly and in line with the requirements of the Code.

The principles outlined in this guidance can also generally be applied to other kinds of online communication, such as personal websites and blogs, discussion boards and general content shared online, including text, photographs, images, video and audio files.

[1] Social media: "Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking."

[2] Social networking: "The use of dedicated websites and applications to interact with other users, or to find people with similar interests to one's own."

How the Code can be applied to social media use

The Code contains a series of statements that taken together signify what good nursing and midwifery practice looks like. It is important that you display a commitment to these standards including:

"Use all forms of spoken, written and digital communication (including social media and networking sites) responsibly." (The Code, paragraph 20.10)

Nurses and midwives may put their registration at risk, and students may jeopardise their ability to join our register, if they act in any way that is unprofessional or unlawful on social media including (but not limited to):

- sharing confidential information inappropriately;
- posting pictures of patients and people receiving care without their consent;
- posting inappropriate comments about patients;
- bullying, intimidating or exploiting people;
- building or pursuing relationships with patients or service users;
- stealing personal information or using someone else's identity;
- encouraging violence or self-harm; and
- inciting hatred or discrimination.

If you are aware that another nurse or midwife has used social media in any of these ways, it might be helpful to refer to our guidance on raising concerns (NMC, 2013). This sets out your professional duty to report any concerns you have about the safety of people in your care or the public, and the steps you should take to do this.

We highlight the relationship between social media use and the Code on the next page.

Prioritise people

The Code emphasises the importance of putting the interests of people using or needing nursing or midwifery services first. You should always make sure that your behaviour on social media is in line with this.

"Treat people with kindness, respect and compassion." (The Code, paragraph 1.1)

Do not post anything on social media that may be viewed as discriminatory, does not recognise individual choice or does not preserve the dignity of those receiving care.

"As a nurse or midwife, you owe a duty of confidentiality to all those who are receiving care." (The Code, paragraph 5)

It is unacceptable for nurses and midwives to discuss matters related to the people in their care outside clinical settings. If you refer to your work or study on social media you need to demonstrate respect and professionalism towards all your patients or service users by respecting their right to privacy and confidentiality. This is regardless of whether you believe that there is a risk they could be identified.

Sharing confidential information online can have the potential to be more damaging than sharing it verbally due to the speed at which it can be shared and the size of the potential audience. It is important to remember that although some information may not directly breach a patient's right to confidentiality when anonymised, people may still be identifiable and this behaviour may be inappropriate.

Practise effectively

"Always practise in line with the best available evidence." (The Code, paragraph 6)

As a nurse or midwife, you have a responsibility to ensure that any information or advice that you provide via social media is evidence-based and correct to the best of your knowledge. You should not discuss anything that does not fall within your level of competence and you should avoid making general comments that could be considered inaccurate.

"Maintain effective communication with colleagues." (The Code, paragraph 8.2)

You must work cooperatively with your colleagues and this includes communicating in an appropriate way when you use social media.

Preserve safety

"Act without delay if you believe that there is a risk to patient safety or public protection." (The Code, paragraph 16)

Social media should not be used to harass or victimise someone, or to attempt to prevent or discourage someone from raising their concerns.

Promote professionalism and trust

"Stay objective and have clear professional boundaries at all times with people in your care (including those who have been in your care in the past), their families and carers." (The Code, paragraph 20.6)

Nurses and midwives should not use social networks to build or pursue relationships with patients and service users as this

can blur important professional boundaries. It is important to be aware that even without engaging with patients or service users on social media, they may still be able to access your information.

"Act with honesty and integrity in any financial dealings you have with everyone you have a professional relationship with, including people in your care." (The Code, paragraph 21.3)

As a nurse or midwife, you have a responsibility to ensure that you declare any conflict of interest around material that you post on social media including financial or commercial dealings.

How to use social media responsibly

Be informed

Make sure that you familiarise yourself with how individual social media applications work and be clear about the advantages and disadvantages.

Think before you post

It is important to realise that even the strictest privacy settings have limitations. This is because, once something is online, it can be copied and redistributed.

Protect your professionalism and your reputation

If you are unsure whether something you post online could compromise your professionalism or your reputation, you should think about what the information means for you in practice and how it affects your responsibility to keep to the Code.

It is important to consider who and what you associate with on social media. For example, acknowledging someone else's post can imply that you endorse or support their point of view. You should consider the possibility of other people mentioning you in inappropriate posts. If you have used social media for a number of years, it is important to consider, in relation to the Code, what you have posted online in the past.



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