

Social Media

2013



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The Association of Registered Nurses of Newfoundland and Labrador (ARNNL) has the legislative authority to regulate the profession of registered nursing in the interest of the public. This mandate grants authority to ARNNL to develop position statements outlining professional obligations of registered nurses (RNs) in adhering to standards of practice and codes of ethics.

The ARNNL recognizes that technology and electronic communication is ever evolving and provides increasing and novel methods for information sharing. Social media is prevalent in society. In availing of the opportunities social media provides, RNs are required to adhere to standards related to communication, professionalism, and codes of ethics regardless of whether social media use is of a personal or professional nature. Maintaining privacy, confidentiality, therapeutic relationships, professional boundaries, and public trust are required of the RN and may be at risk where social media is in use.

Social Media refers to a group of ever-changing online tools (e.g., Facebook, blogs, LinkedIn, tweeting, texting, online chat forums, YouTube) that facilitate online relationships and information sharing.

WITH THE OPPORTUNITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA COME THE RESPONSIBILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE NATURE, BENEFITS, AND CONSEQUENCES OF ITS USE, AS WELL AS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO MANAGE ITS PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL RISK.

Expectations

The following outlines expected professional behaviours within and outside the workplace in the use of social media:

- RNs must apply practice and ethical standards equally to online activities as they do in other circumstances.
- RNs should avail of the appropriate beneficial uses of social media including, but not limited to: networking and nurturing collegial and professional relationships; enriching a knowledge base; exchanging of knowledge; dissemination and discussion of nursing and health related education research, and best practices; and educating the public on nursing, and health related matters.
- RNs must not transmit, or place, publicly any client information. Posting client-related information on social media, whether intended or unintended, may breach client privacy, confidentiality, and professional standards. It may also violate relevant provincial and federal privacy laws and employer policies. Posting of perceived non-identifiable client information is not exempt from this position (e.g., the client might recognize themselves).
- RNs are legally bound to maintain appropriate boundaries. Accepting 'friend' requests from past or present clients or family members may transition the relationship from professional to personal, causing boundaries of the relationship to become blurred, and the scope of professional responsibility may be extended (Canadian Nurses Protective Society (CNPS), 2012).
- RNs must know and adhere to their employer policies governing use of such media in the workplace. Policies might address personal use of employer computers and equipment, personal computing during work hours, and types of websites that may or may not be accessed. Where policies do not exist or are unclear, RNs should advocate for policy direction.
- RNs are responsible to bring to the attention of appropriate authorities any identified breach in clients privacy and/or confidentiality.



Considerations

It is important to consider the entirety of your social media presence, and what that reveals about your clients, your practice, and yourself.

- While online content and behaviour has the potential to enhance the nursing profession, it also has the potential to undermine the public trust and belief about the integrity of the nursing profession, the RN-client relationship, and the individual RN's career.
- What is posted online, whether professionally or personally, leaves an electronic footprint and once posted is difficult to remove.
- Secure or private settings do not preclude authorized viewers (e.g., Facebook friends) from screen capturing and sharing.
- What is said online and via social media is something you would also say publicly.
- Tone and context may not be clear or may be misinterpreted. For example, what is meant as humour may be interpreted as negative and serious.
- Offering health-related advice on social media sites could lead to professional liability (CNPS, 2012).
- Individual posts may not reveal identities, but subsequent posts on the same subject may offer progressively more information.
- Posting anonymously or under a pseudonym does not protect against the possible consequences of a breach of confidentiality or defamation (CNPS, 2012).
- Publicly posting disparaging remarks about employers or co-workers, even if considered to be non-identifiable, can result in employment and/or personal liability consequences. Such activity could have client safety ramifications if such comments were detrimental to a cohesive health delivery team.

Consequences

Potential consequences for RNs for inappropriate use of social media are varied and will depend, in part, on the particular nature of the RNs conduct.

- Improper use of social media may violate laws established to protect client privacy and confidentiality. Such violations may result in both civil and criminal penalties, including fines and possible jail time.
- Breaches in professional standards may result in disciplinary action by ARNNL.
- A RN may face personal liability or be individually sued for defamation, invasion of privacy, or harassment. If conduct violates the policies of the employer, s/he may face employment consequences including termination.
- The actions of the RN may damage the reputation of the health care organization, or subject the organization to a law suit or regulatory consequences.

Strategies

Registered Nurses should stay informed about strategies to safely and effectively navigate the online world. These include (but are not limited to):

- review policies and standards that guide social media use and electronic practices.
- review best practice guidelines.
- engage in ongoing dialogue with colleagues around opportunities and challenges.
- participate in continuing education events.
- maintain awareness of risk management strategies, and
- maintain awareness of the entirety of your social media presence, and how that impacts your clients, you, and the profession.



For additional information on reducing your professional and personal risks refer to the Canadian Nurses Protective Society InfoLAW on Social Media (2012).

Conclusion

There are both benefits and risks involved with the use of social media. When faced with an ethical dilemma or question involving social media in practice, RNs have several tools at their disposal including the CNA Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses, various ethical decision-making frameworks (e.g., CNA Ethics in Practice), relevant employer supported ethical consultations, and consultation with ARNNL.

RNs must use professional judgment. In being prudent and conscientious, nurses may enjoy the personal and professional benefits of social media without violating client, professional, employer, and/or legal requirements for maintaining privacy, confidentiality, and a professional presence.



References and Resources

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