



BMA

Social media
Practical guidance
and best practice



British Medical Association
bma.org.uk

Introduction

The growth of online social networks means that the way in which we communicate with one another – on both a personal and professional level – has become unrecognisable from 10, or even five years ago. From primary school children to grandparents, social media connects the world.

Having the power to broadcast your thoughts to a potential audience of millions can be both empowering and daunting. However, the benefits of having an active presence on at least some social channels far outweigh the risks – as long as you're aware of those risks.

This document aims to outline some of these benefits, make you aware of some of these risks and equip you to be active and engaged. We hope this guidance will be useful to any doctors new to social media and those starting out on their medical careers, but also as a reference point for regular users. While this isn't intended to be definitive guidance, when used in conjunction with the BMA's social media, ethics and professionalism advice and guidance from organisations such as the GMC (see further reading below), as well as with a heavy dose of common sense, it should cover most eventualities.

What is social media?

Social media is a catch-all term for any online communication channel that allows the user to find and interact with a community. The most popular and widely used are:

Facebook

A social networking website that allows individuals to create a profile, then befriend and share content with other users. This includes uploading personal updates, photos and videos as well as creating closed groups, events and pages. Organisations such as businesses and charities use Facebook in a slightly different way. They create pages, which inform other users about their services and offerings. They can post updates to these pages such as photos and videos, but can't 'befriend' other users.

Facebook also allows both closed (private) and open groups, which can be set up by any Facebook user about anything – whether event, geographic location, or shared topic of interest.

Twitter

A content-sharing and micro-blogging site. Twitter enables you to 'follow' other users of interest to you

so you can see their tweets. These are short posts – limited to 140 characters in length – that may contain text, photos, videos and links. You can participate in discussions that interest you, and follow trending topics. Twitter is a great way to stay on top of breaking news and to receive real-time updates around particular events – a parliamentary debate or a football match, for example.

LinkedIn

A social networking tool targeted specifically at the business community. Your profile reads like an online CV, giving details on education, work experience and professional interests. LinkedIn allows you to establish professional networks and explore employment opportunities.

YouTube

Video hosting platform that allows you to upload, share and embed video content as well as watch videos and playlists that other users have created.

The BMA is active on **Twitter**, **Facebook**, **LinkedIn** and **YouTube**.

How do doctors use social media?

In the same way as anyone else. For pleasure, but also to network, share ideas and information, offer and access professional and peer support, campaign and build communities on shared areas of interest. Social media is a great way to keep on top of debates and developments that are important to your working life. It also allows you to monitor what influential individuals and organisations are doing on these issues.

You shouldn't feel like you have to be saying something all the time. Accepted wisdom says that of all the users of social media, only 10% actually make vocal contributions. The other 90% are known as 'lurkers' (a neutral term) – happier to be in the background, taking note of what's going on.

Personal capacity?

Professional capacity?

Not at all?

We are constantly fed mixed messages about using social media. Depending on who you believe and what you read, you should:

- use it only in a personal capacity
- use it only in a professional capacity
- use it, but don't use your real name
- use it, but be sure to use your real name

In reality, different people use social media in different ways; and doctors are no exception. Some use it solely in a professional capacity while others prefer to keep it personal. Many prefer a mix of the two, switching between personal and professional personas across different sites. Advice from the GMC on being anonymous on social media while identifying as a doctor is discussed in the BMA's separate guidance document 'Social media, ethics and professionalism'.

If you do decide to be an active user of social media, you can build relationships in the same way you would in person with other doctors, members of the public, journalists, politicians and stakeholders. Share your stories, influence debate, contribute your expertise and monitor what's happening in your areas of interest.

Some examples of social media being used effectively by doctors include:

Education and development

The Twitter Journal Club is a virtual study group, which 'meets' every Sunday evening at 8pm on Twitter to evaluate and discuss academic articles.

Set up in 2011 by junior doctor and avid Twitter user Natalie Silvey, **#TwitJC** sees doctors, researchers, authors and students joining in using the hashtag (a way of filtering messages to make it easier for users to find content relevant to a specific topic).

Each discussion lasts for two hours and a summary of key themes from the discussion is circulated at the end.

Communities and peer engagement

As well as networking on a professional level in a 'structured' environment such as a journal club, social media allows doctors and medical students to engage in a more casual manner to share tips, advice and professional experiences.

Community websites specifically for medical professionals such as the BMA's Connecting Doctors platform or **doctors.net.uk** offer a safe environment to give and receive peer support, as well as contribute to debates.

They provide common ground based on where you are, what you do, or what you care about. Such groups, or forums, can be open to all or be private – accessible by invitation only – depending on their purpose and function. They may also give an option to participate anonymously, or under an assumed name.

Campaigning, awareness raising and social change

Social media can also be used to enact change – either socially, or in the workplace. A great example of this is the **#hellomynameis** campaign, started by a hospital doctor, Kate Granger MBE, while she was undergoing treatment for cancer.

Finding herself on the other side of the doctor/patient relationship, Dr Granger was concerned to find that hospital staff caring for her did not introduce themselves. She launched **#hellomynameis** on Twitter encouraging medical professionals to introduce themselves by name to their patients. Her campaign was supported all over the world, with more than 400,000 health workers across 90 organisations backing it.

Dr Granger's campaign has made over one billion impressions on Twitter since it launched – with an average of six tweets an hour using the hashtag.



Privacy on social media

Different social media platforms have different privacy settings. It's up to you how secure or private you want to make your social activity.

The most sensible solution is to familiarise yourself with the options to make an informed decision. You can always make changes to your settings in the future, including limiting access to a restricted group of contacts. You may also wish to review the content of your personal social media accounts on a regular basis and delete anything that could reflect negatively on you or your employer.

Facebook allows you to fine-tune your privacy settings so you can choose exactly who can see posts on your page. There are also options as to how easy Facebook makes it for people to find you by searching on the site.

Twitter allows you to make your tweets private, viewable only by others who you've approved to follow you. You can also DM (direct message) other users, which allows you to communicate privately, one-to-one, without divulging your email address. There are options to enable and disable settings on this, such as who is able to message you.

Community websites and forums will usually offer a variety of privacy options – for example, forums may be private and open to invitees only or you may be able to contribute anonymously or under a pseudonym.

Whatever settings you choose, privacy (and confidentiality) can never be guaranteed. Even if the group or discussion forum purports to be completely private, it's probably not. In the same way that no email or conversation with a roomful of people is ever truly private, there's always a chance that things can leak.

Be careful also to not post information which can be used for ID theft or which might be compromising. Also make sure that you get consent from other people before uploading pictures of them or posting other personal information about them. And, it goes without saying, keep your passwords secure.

A good rule of thumb: don't say or reveal anything on social media that you wouldn't be happy to see in the press. You never know who might be sharing things without your knowledge or looking at your social accounts.

Several members of a private Facebook group for junior doctors – set up to discuss the 2015/16 contract dispute – found themselves the subject of unwanted media attention. Some members of the press gained access to the group and used it to trawl for information about committee representatives, including confidential discussions between them and information about their private lives.

Trolling, harassment and abuse

You may be committed to being respectful and conciliatory on social media, but not everyone is. As in life, relations on social media are not always harmonious. With so many opinions flying about, it would be naïve to think that everybody will see eye to eye all the time. You are bound to come across posts with which you don't agree and, by the same token, may yourself post things with which others take issue. There is of course never any justification to be abusive.

If you see something or receive a message that you don't like, either, consider quoting facts to lower the temperature and correct misrepresentations, or, ignore it or unfollow the user and have no further communication with them. Chances are, that will be the end of it. If you make a mistake in a contribution be prompt in admitting it and correcting it.

What is trolling?

Trolling is seeking satisfaction in provoking negative emotions in others. Not all offensive or irritating social media posts count as trolling. Criticism and disagreement can be positives, and shouldn't always be dismissed as trolling. What distinguishes the troll is that they're not really looking to persuade you, correct you, or engage you in their point of view. They're simply trying to provoke a response.

Don't feed the trolls. Most of the time they will go away if you don't give them any time or attention. Sometimes, it may be appropriate to reply. For instance, you might want to correct the record if someone has said something untrue about you. If you do respond, try to take as neutral a tone as possible. Otherwise you're simply giving them what they want.

Persistent harassers can be blocked from contacting you or be reported to the site

If you're finding messages from someone upsetting or distracting, consider blocking or muting them. This should stop them contacting you using the blocked account, although there's nothing to stop someone who is determined from setting up a new one and getting in touch with you through that.

Both Twitter and Facebook allow you to report posts that break their rules. Where a user is found to have broken the rules, the offending post may be deleted, and the user's account suspended or disabled. Activities such as harassment, threats and spam are examples of behaviour that contravenes the rules on both platforms. If in doubt, refer to the full rules to check what's covered.

More information on how to block and report content is available in **Twitter** and **Facebook's** help centres. Other social media platforms should have an equivalent page to guide you through their own processes.



Other

Report the worst offenders to the site or to the police

Threats and harassment are illegal when carried out over social media. The police should take it seriously if you report it. It might be helpful to build up evidence of abuse by taking screen shots and noting other details, such as the time or place you received the messages.

In 2016, new guidance from the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) introduced greater powers for prosecution of internet trolls, with many instances of people being jailed for trolling.

The **Citizens Advice Bureau** has helpful guidance on what counts as harassment and what your rights are, including in the civil courts.

You should also be aware that the improper use of social media may give rise to other legal issues including defamation, contempt of court, misuse of confidential information, and, breach of intellectual property rights. Also bear in mind that once information has been disclosed, it cannot be recovered and this may also result in liability.

While this guidance highlights a number of key issues, it is not exhaustive.

If you have any questions or comments about this guidance please contact the BMA social media team on **social.media@bma.org.uk**

Further reading

British Medical Association (2014) *Medical students ethics tool kit*.

bma.org.uk/advice/employment/ethics/medical-students-ethics-toolkit

British Medical Association (2017) *Social media, ethics and professionalism*.

General Medical Council (2013) *Doctors' use of social media*.

http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical_guidance/21186.asp

Royal College of General Practitioners (2013) *Social Media Highway Code*.

<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/social-media>

Social media resources

Mashable *General resource for all things social media*.
<http://mashable.com/>

Twitter analytics *Login with your Twitter account and measure the success of your tweets*.
<https://analytics.twitter.com/>



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