Social Media Use in Physiotherapy: How to best use social media when you’re a physiotherapist, physiotherapist assistant or PRT

Social media is an ever-changing and exciting opportunity to further engage with your patients and colleagues. Physiotherapists have been actively involved in the progression of digital trends and as innovative and driven practitioners; you will no doubt continue to use it to the advantage of your practice and profession.

Social media continues to quickly grow and change how people communicate. While there is much opportunity to network, educate, develop professionally and grow businesses, there are areas to consider when communicating online. CPA has created guidelines on how to best use social media in your physiotherapy field. This document is divided this into an overview of how you might orient your social media communication and then explore:

1. Privacy and Confidentiality
2. Privacy Controls and Settings
3. Examples of Privacy and Confidentiality Breaches
4. Professional Conduct
5. Interpersonal Respect
6. Transparency
7. Risk Management

Social Media Use in Physiotherapy:
How to best use social media when you’re a physiotherapist, physiotherapist assistant or PRT

Personal Social Media
Personal social media channels allow you to share family and vacation pictures, celebrate birthdays, share your fitness challenges, and charitable endeavours.

Strike a delicate balance with social media: your personal posts should not put your patients or your professional online brand at risk.

Patient-Oriented Social Media
The objective of patient-oriented social media is to interact with current, past, or potential patients.

In the patient-physiotherapist relationship, social media is used as a tool for information, promotion and education.

Some clinic owners use social media to market their services to groups that may benefit from physiotherapy such as athletic groups, community centres and seniors’ groups.

Some websites host an area where patients can submit questions to their physiotherapist, with responses by email or a public discussion board where people with the same condition can communicate with each other.

Profession-Oriented Social Media
Profession-oriented social media is used as a professional resource by physiotherapists, PTA’s and PRT’s. The Association, the regulatory Colleges, and other partners share news and developments impacting the profession nationally and internationally:

Social media provides ease and accessibility for knowledge translation through discussion boards, webinars, podcasts and video-sharing.

Physiotherapists also have increased access to information for professional development.

Social media provides a medium for discussion with peers about treatment options, access to professional development updates and assessment and treatment techniques from other practitioners.

Researchers also find social media useful for recruitment procedures and dissemination. Social media is a quick, open access avenue to reach a potentially large volume of professionals and researchers releasing new findings that will impact patient care.

The immediacy and reach of social media means job openings can be filled more quickly.

Using social media professionally has merit, but awareness of certain practices is crucial to professional conduct.

Below, we examine guidelines that will help you engage on social media while maintaining professionalism.

1. Privacy and Confidentiality
An important consideration in the use of patient-oriented social media is the individual’s privacy and right to confidentiality. In Canada, there are several laws that secure rights to privacy, including:

- The Privacy Act (www.laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/P-21/index.html) and

Currently, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador have privacy legislation, which applies to health information that has been declared substantially similar to PIPEDA with respect to health information custodians. You may also find resources with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada or its provincial branches (www.blog.privcom.gc.ca).

Physiotherapists are also accountable to their provincial regulatory body, the College, and its standards for the use of personal information. Inappropriate use of social media use may be included under the professional conduct of a physiotherapist and be subject to disciplinary action by the College.
Using social media professionally has merit, but awareness of certain practices is crucial to professional conduct.

Before posting on social media, consider the people who may be affected by your content: patients, peers and staff. If you share posts or pictures of patients and/or staff, be sure to have a consent/release form signed, which will indicate their acceptance of their content or image being used.

Many employers have policies on the level of information published about the facility’s operations and staff, and these should be reviewed prior to posting.

Using a nickname, a pseudonym, or referencing a specific item (i.e. room number, hospital, mechanism of injury, sport, etc.) is rarely sufficient protection for an individual’s right to privacy. Parts of an anecdote can be used to identify a person, not just an individual item.

Referencing an old case also might not exclude the identification of the patient or person. When discussing a patient, extreme caution is vital.

2. Privacy Controls and Settings
If you decide to have a social media account where you post both professional and private content, be aware that your private content can still be associated with your professional account.

If you choose to create a private (versus personal) social media account it is recommended that you restrict who can see your posts to friends and family. You can usually adjust privacy controls in the “settings” menu.

3. Examples of Privacy and Confidentiality Breaches
A health professional who discussed a patient with a colleague on social media resulted in a professional misconduct finding because the patient’s first name and other personal health information were provided. Even if the intention was to problem-solve together, it is inappropriate to post this type of information on social media.

An employee who complains about a colleague or their employer online through Twitter, Facebook, or blogs can be terminated, as was shown in a case with a personal caregiver at a nursing home. Action against her could have been worse had she terminated, as was shown in a case with a colleague or their employer online through Twitter, Facebook, or blogs.

3. Examples of Privacy and Confidentiality Breaches
A health professional who discussed a patient with a colleague on social media resulted in a professional misconduct finding because the patient’s first name and other personal health information were provided. Even if the intention was to problem-solve together, it is inappropriate to post this type of information on social media.

An employee who complains about a colleague or their employer online through Twitter, Facebook, or blogs can be terminated, as was shown in a case with a personal caregiver at a nursing home. Action against her could have been worse had she terminated, as was shown in a case with a colleague or their employer online through Twitter, Facebook, or blogs.

5. Interpersonal Respect
As in live conversations, it is best to practice social etiquette at all times. Clear, concise, accurate information will add value and expertise to a conversation. Readers respect this style of communication versus rants, false proclamations, or self-promotion.

Use your social media network to help raise awareness about the benefits of physiotherapy and its usefulness in certain conditions.

If you do participate in online discussions, be prepared to be challenged by peers and show respect for their opinions or theories. Critique ideas, not people. Us discussions as an opportunity to enhance, not shut down, conversations, and encourage different points of view.

Where possible, have supporting resources for your claims if you have drawn conclusions that are new or differ from the traditional knowledge base.

If you are posting information that belongs to someone else, be sure to credit your source (i.e., LinkedIn, Facebook, retweet from Twitter, etc.). It is recommended that you review a site’s privacy and confidentiality rules before making any postings.

If you have a company website, include a Terms of Agreement policy and a statement noting that individual treatment or consultation is not provided online.

6. Transparency
Transparency—being clear about your identity—goes hand-in-hand with respect. When participating in discussion boards or posting comments on other websites, clearly identify yourself as a physiotherapist and include your credentials.

If you have a conflict of interest, declare it (i.e., if you have a partnership with a product that you recommend or endorse).

7. Risk management
Be informed, be prepared and use the following checklist going forward:

a) Operational Advice
• Review what you have written before posting. Think about who may see/read it and the impact it may have on your employment or your clients
• Always use passwords to ensure privacy. Remember to change them frequently, make them complex, and choose different ones for different programs. Keep passwords or documentation on separate computers for personal and professional uses
• Become familiar with your workplace rules. This may include not taking photographs of the workplace, staff, or patients.

b) Personal Advice
• Do not vent frustrations.
• Keep your personal profile private to people you trust.
• Avoid discussing health-related topics that could be viewed as dispensing treatment advice.
• Do not initiate contact with any patients or their families.

c) Permanency and Distribution
Everything you post online will remain somewhere forever. Everything can be distributed further, archived, saved, or captured as a screen shot. Even deleting content after you’ve posted it may not completely remove your message. Further, posting anonymously will not decrease the risk; originating addresses can be traced.

References

Notes:
*Defamation is when an unjustified statement is made about a person or organization that could harm their reputation.

Bibliography


