SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MEDICAL PROFESSION:  
A guide to online professionalism for medical practitioners and medical students

A joint initiative of AMACDT, NZMADITC, NZMSA and AMSA

BACKGROUND
The professional standards of doctors and medical students form the cornerstone of quality patient care. Based on expectations of the community and medical peers, standards are re-emphasised throughout medical training and practice. Professional standards are well established, but the world to which they apply is expanding rapidly.

Society has enthusiastically embraced user-generated online content such as blogging, personal websites and on-line social networking. Evidence emerging from studies, legal cases and media reports demonstrates how the use of these media can pose risks for medical professionals. Inappropriate on-line behaviour potentially damages personal integrity, doctor-patient and doctor-colleague relationships, and future employment opportunities. The Australian Medical Association (AMA), The New Zealand Medical Association (NZMA), The Australian Medical Students’ Association (AMSA) and The New Zealand Medical Students’ Association (NZMSA) represent the interests of the medical profession in Australia and New Zealand. They are committed to upholding the principles of medical professionalism.

AIMS
The guide aims to:
• Explore existing evidence related to doctors and social media and the medical profession
• Discuss the personal and professional risks posed by online social media for medical students and doctors
• Highlight the importance of maintaining professional standards when using online social media
• Provide advice about how to minimise risks of social media
• Provide doctors with a simple tool to assess their online professionalism

HAVE YOU EVER...
• Googled yourself? Do you feel comfortable with the information shown?
• Posted information about a patient or person from your workplace online?
• Accepted a friend request from a patient on Facebook?
• Considered tagging photos and videos of yourself that you wouldn’t want patients or work to see?
• Checked the privacy settings page on Facebook?

CONCLUSION
While medical students and doctors are entitled to a private personal life, online social media have challenged the concepts of ‘public’ and ‘private’. But traditional expectations regarding the conduct of the medical profession still apply to this non-traditional context: medical students and doctors always have a duty to patients and the community to maintain professional standards, including while using online social media.

This guide will be of benefit not only to doctors and medical students, but also to organisations such as universities and hospitals who may wish to develop their own policies regarding on-line professionalism.

The guide will be released late in 2010.

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