

FACULTY OF BIOLOGY, MEDICINE AND HEALTH

Guidance on Social Networking for Healthcare Students

What is the purpose of this document?

This document provides advice and guidance for healthcare students about the benefits and potential dangers of social networking and suggests ways in which their personal and professional interests, and those of others, can be protected while in the online environment.

What are social networking sites used for?

Social networking is a popular online activity: millions of people of all ages and backgrounds use social networking sites every day. Online social networking sites, such as [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [MySpace](#) and [Bebo](#), are used:

- To keep in touch with friends, both in words and through sharing music, video and other types of files ([YouTube](#) is also used for sharing videos, and [Flickr](#) for sharing images, online).
- For educational and professional benefit, through sharing information about the latest developments in treatments and practice, problem-solving, encouraging participation, and community building.
- To forge new relationships based on common interests.
- To make their views and opinions known.
- To take part in discussions on virtually any subject.

People often interact with social networking sites over long periods of time and, occasionally, excessive activity of this nature may have detrimental effects on their work or study.

What is the social networking environment?

It is important to remember that social networking sites are public and therefore, in theory, accessible to anybody. In many cases, ownership of the material posted on them belongs to the site, not the person who posted it, and so sites such as [Facebook](#) are free to use it in any way they see fit. Material posted online remains there permanently, if not as part of an active page then as part of easily-accessible 'cached', i.e. historical, versions of it.

Who visits social networking sites, and why?

Anybody can visit social networking sites and gain access to the information that is uploaded to them. These people include:

- Your intended audience, i.e. your friends, colleagues and others, to share information and to keep in touch.
- Potential employers, who are, increasingly, using social networking sites to gather information about people who have applied for positions within their organisations.
- Criminals, including sexual predators who could use information about you to compromise your safety or wellbeing, and fraudsters, who could steal information about you and impersonate you online, to your potential cost.
- The police, as part of investigations into illegal activities.
- Professional healthcare bodies such as the [General Dental Council](#), [General Medical Council](#), [General Pharmaceutical Council](#), [General Social Care Council](#), [Health Professions Council](#), and [Nursing & Midwifery Council](#), who may access information directly or be asked to investigate material referred on to them by other people.
- Patients, clients and other service users, who may be looking for healthcare information in general, or for your views and comments in particular. Your professional relationship with your patients, and your career, could be compromised at any time by

indiscriminate posting of details about patients or inappropriate information about yourself.

What precautions should be taken when social networking?

The same ethics, morals and penalties apply to online social networking as to any other activity. This is particularly true for healthcare students and professionals, who are expected by the University of Manchester, their professional bodies, and by the public generally, to meet the same standards of behaviour both in and out of their professional settings. Healthcare students from Schools in the Faculty should therefore conduct themselves appropriately online, and take reasonable precautions to ensure that the information they upload cannot be used in a way that could place them, or others, at a disadvantage, either personally or professionally, now or at any time in the future.

The following pointers may be helpful:

- Do everything that you can to limit access to your posts to those for whom they are intended. Change security settings if possible to restrict unwanted access.
- Consider the language and terminology that you use when you are online and make sure that it is appropriate.
- Avoid posting personal information such as phone numbers or personal addresses, of you or anybody else, since these may fall into the hands of criminals.
- Use your common sense. If you feel that a post, a picture, or a video that you are about to upload might have repercussions for you later, or might not be in good taste (e.g. it relates to sexual activity or inappropriate behaviour, or it expresses inappropriate views), then simply do not post it. Once it is online it is there for good.
- Make sure you are thinking clearly before you go online. If, for any reason such as the effects of medication, stress or inebriation, your judgement might temporarily be impaired, you may be tempted to post something that you otherwise would not.
- Do not post material that might be considered offensive and/or derogatory, that could cause somebody else to feel bullied, harassed, or that could harm somebody's reputation. If you have a grievance about an individual related to your programme, follow it up through the recognised channels in the School, Faculty and/or the wider University.
- Avoid posting confidential information about patients, clients and service users that could violate professional codes of conduct.
- It is imperative that if you post anything about somebody else, including any images of them, it is done with their knowledge and consent. It might seem inoffensive to post images of friends, relatives, staff or other colleagues, but it might easily cause offence that you had not intended or could not have foreseen.
- Try to make sure that the people to whom you give access to your information use it sensibly, and also that they themselves do not upload potentially incriminating material about you, which can be just as damaging.
- Avoid joining any groups that could be seen as discriminatory or judgemental in nature.

Are there any related policies and guidance in the University?

[The University's Conduct and Discipline of Students \(Regulation XVII\)](#) document states that a student may be liable to disciplinary action in respect of conduct which, amongst others:

“involves violent, indecent, disorderly, threatening or offensive behaviour or language (whether expressed orally or in writing, including electronically) whilst on University premises or engaged in any University activity” and “involves distributing or publishing a poster, notice, sign or any publication which is offensive, intimidating, threatening, indecent or illegal, including the broadcasting and electronic distribution of such material”.

Regulation XVII also states that:

“the conduct covered (above) shall constitute misconduct if it took place on University property or premises, or elsewhere if the student was involved in a University activity, was representing the University, was present at that place by virtue of his or her status as a student of the University or if the conduct raises questions about the fitness of the student on a programme leading directly to a professional qualification or calling to be admitted to and practise that profession or calling.”

The University of Manchester’s Dignity at Work and Study Policies and Procedures give information about the nature and consequences of acts of misconduct while social networking, such as discrimination, bullying and harassment¹, and the penalties that they may incur.

These policies should be read in conjunction with this guidance. The University’s Dignity at Work Procedure for Students states:

“All cases of harassment, discrimination and bullying will be taken very seriously by the University and, where necessary the appropriate procedure will be used to investigate complaints. Similar arrangements will be used in dealing with complaints made by members of staff or by visitors to the University.”

“Cases of proven harassment, discrimination or bullying may be treated as a disciplinary offence where it is not possible to reach a compromise or resolution. Some cases of harassment, discrimination or bullying if proven could result in dismissal for staff members or expulsion for students.”

In addition, the University’s Crucial Guide states that:

“The University expects its members to treat one another with respect. There are established procedures to use if you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the University’s facilities and services, and you are encouraged to use these procedures to bring such matters to the University’s attention. Inappropriate or defamatory comments about either the University or its members in any media (print, broadcast, electronic) contravene the University’s regulations and offenders may be liable to disciplinary action.”

What do the Professional Bodies say?

Professional body codes and guidance also explore the potential consequences of social networking activity:

General Dental Council: ‘Standards for Dental Professionals’

Paragraph 3.2, ‘Protect the confidentiality of patients’ information’:

*“(You must) prevent information from being accidentally revealed and prevent unauthorised access by keeping information secure **at all times**”.*

Paragraph 6.3, ‘Be trustworthy’:

¹ **Harassment** is unwanted conduct that may create the effect (intentionally or unintentionally) of violating a person’s dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment which interferes with an individual’s learning, working or social environment or induces stress, anxiety or sickness on the part of the harassed person.

Discrimination takes place when an individual or a group of people is treated less favourably than others because of their race, gender, gender reassignment, marital status, status as a civil partner, disability, age, religion or belief, sexual orientation or other factors unrelated to their ability or potential.

Bullying can be defined as repeated or persistent actions, criticism or personal abuse, either in public or private, which (intentionally or unintentionally) humiliates, denigrates, undermines, intimidates or injures the recipient. It should, in particular, be borne in mind that much bullying occurs in the context of a power imbalance between victims and alleged perpetrators.

*“(You must) maintain appropriate standards of personal behaviour **in all walks of life** so that patients have confidence in you and the public have confidence in the dental profession”.*

General Medical Council: ‘Good Medical Practice’

Paragraphs 56 to 58, ‘Being honest and trustworthy’

“Probity means being honest and trustworthy, and acting with integrity: this is at the heart of medical professionalism”.

*“You must make sure that your conduct **at all times** justifies your patients' trust in you and the public's trust in the profession”.*

“You must inform the GMC without delay if, anywhere in the world, you have accepted a caution, been charged with or found guilty of a criminal offence, or if another professional body has made a finding against your registration as a result of fitness to practise procedures”.

Nursing and Midwifery Council: ‘Your Code of Conduct applies to your Personal Life’

“Nurses and midwives could be putting their registration at risk if posting inappropriate comments about colleagues or patients or posting any material that could be considered explicit”.

What conclusions can be drawn from all of this?

If the way you conduct yourself online breaks laws, or goes against the codes of practice set down by your professional healthcare body, then you risk the same penalties as you would in any other setting. These include referral to the Faculty Fitness to Practise Committee and potential damage to your career, fines, and even imprisonment.

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Acknowledgement:

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