DRAFT ASHP Statement on Use of Social Media by Pharmacy Professionals

Position

The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) encourages pharmacy professionals (e.g., pharmacists, technicians, analysts, and students across all practice settings) to use social media platforms responsibly and respectfully when representing themselves in a professional capacity. This statement outlines key considerations to guide pharmacy professionals in their use of social media. It is intended to be complementary to, and not replace, any guidance provided by employers. Social media can serve as a valuable tool for building and strengthening relationships with patients, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and the public. To achieve that goal, pharmacy professionals should:

- Consider the purpose (intent) and potential outcomes of participation in social media and develop the strategies and skills needed to use social media to achieve these objectives.
- Exercise professional judgment and adhere to professional standards and legal requirements in both private and public social media communications, especially legal and ethical obligations to protect the privacy of personal health information.
- Consider that social media may provide a means to not only provide timely and accurate health information, but can also be used to rebut inaccurate, misleading, or outdated information.

Background

While the definition of "social media" varies, this statement identifies social media as online tools that facilitate the sharing of professional content and interaction among individuals.[1]

Examples include professional, career-building, and social networking platforms which may serve multiple purposes.[2-3] Medical information sites that publicize commentary from medical professionals (e.g., The Pharmacist Society, Sermo) should also be considered social media. This can include algorithmically-driven mass media distributions and related digital media technologies (e.g., Substack, short-form videos on YouTube). As social media and related technologies continue to evolve, social media may include emerging platforms and communication tools that support professional engagement among health care professionals and with the public.

Social media platforms have transformed communication by lowering barriers to exchange information and expand participation, while also increasing the potential for harm such as the spread of misinformation.[4]

Like other health care professionals, pharmacy professionals use social media. Pharmacy professionals who choose to engage in social media in a professional capacity should apply similar standards as those involving patient care, with intent to help people make the best possible health care and medication-related decisions. Social media can provide pharmacy professionals with opportunities to educate patients and practitioners, seek advice from and provide advice to colleagues, promote the role of pharmacists in caring for patients, engage in debate about issues in health care practice and policy, and broadly guide optimal medication use by individual patients and populations (e.g., highlighting the importance of medication adherence or advocating for the importance of routine vaccination).

Participation in Social Media

Pharmacy professionals should carefully consider the purpose and potential outcomes of their participation in social media and develop the strategies and skills required to achieve their goals. All health care practitioners, including pharmacy professionals, must be aware of and employ best practices when using social media, because they are held to a higher standard of professionalism both within and outside the workplace when compared to the general public.[5-6] Pharmacy professionals who participate in social media should strive for professionalism in their communications while protecting patient privacy. This includes the following considerations:

- Balance the benefits social media provides with the obligations and liabilities it may create.
- Use guidance and "best practices" documents to provide a framework for engagement.
- Use discretion when considering posting of sensitive topics or matters which could negatively impact the profession of pharmacy or misrepresent the full scope of a particular scenario (e.g., purely venting about a negative patient interaction without using it as an illustrative example for improving pharmacist-patient communication).

Recommendations for Professional Social Media Engagement

ASHP has long advocated for the adoption of high professional aspirations for the pharmacy profession. Pharmacists' responsibilities include "advancing the well-being and dignity of patients" and "acting with high personal standards of integrity and competence."[7] The following recommendations for social media use represent these aspirations, and pharmacy professionals are encouraged to exercise their professional judgment when incorporating social media into their practice.

Advancing the Well-Being and Dignity of Patients. The following are social media recommendations for pharmacy professionals that advance the well-being and dignity of patients.

1. Medical advice offered through social media should be provided in accordance with the professional standards of pharmacy practice. For example, pharmacy professionals should only provide medical advice when they fully understand the patient's medical conditions and are willing to accept the associated responsibilities, especially those regarding privacy and the legal and ethical standards of pharmacy practice. When providing medical advice, pharmacy professionals should champion evidence-based therapies and clinical guideline recommendations. Pharmacy professionals should be aware that providing medical advice could create a pharmacist-patient relationship, with all its attendant obligations and liabilities. All online relationships should conform to the ethical boundaries of an appropriate pharmacist-patient relationship.[8] Additionally, pharmacy professionals must consider variations in scope of practice across different states when counsel is offered on social media platforms.
2. Pharmacy professionals should be cognizant of both the benefits and limitations of online communication. Social media may serve especially well as a point of initial contact or as a convenient way to maintain contact between patients and care providers, but professionals must recognize when a patient's health care needs and information exchange would be better met through other means (e.g., phone consultation, in-person visit, secure patient portal).

3. Complaining about or disparaging patients, even in general terms, does not advance the dignity of patients or the profession and should be avoided. Communications that contain patients' identifying information, whether in text, image, or video format, violate privacy requirements, which are discussed in more detail below. Pharmacy professionals should keep in mind that simply avoiding the name of a patient may not be sufficient to avoid patient identification.

Acting with Integrity and Competence. The following recommendations are intended to assist pharmacy professionals to act with integrity and competence in their use of social media platforms.

1. Pharmacy professionals should carefully distinguish between personal and professional information on social media and make conscientious decisions regarding who will have access to personal or professional information. Although some organizations may recommend use of two separate accounts – one strictly personal and another strictly practice-related – pharmacy professionals may quickly recognize the difficulty of making such distinctions. The higher standards of conduct expected of professionals, even in personal behavior, apply to their participation in social media.[5-8]
2. When providing advice, general health information, advocating for various health behaviors or initiatives, or rebutting misinformation, every effort to provide supporting sources from research or peer-reviewed articles should be made by pharmacy professionals to ensure claims are substantiated.[9] Additionally, pharmacy professionals should avoid using fear-appeal, click-bait, and other negative engagement

methodologies, instead focusing on promoting effectiveness and positive consequences.[10]

3. Pharmacy professionals must be aware that content posted to social media may have reputational consequences for years to come, reflect poorly upon the pharmacy profession, or undermine patient confidence in the care provided. Social media use should be subject to the same professional standards and ethical considerations as other personal or public interactions.[11]
4. The perceived anonymity provided by some social media outlets does not release pharmacy professionals from their ethical obligation to disclose potential conflicts of interest, especially when representing themselves as professionals. Some circumstances may require personal identification or disclosure of potential competing interests.[11]
5. Although all pharmacists should use social media in ways that set positive examples for pharmacy students and residents, preceptors and mentors have a special responsibility to model appropriate practices.[12,13]
6. While the purpose of specific social media content may not be immediately clear, it is crucial for pharmacy professionals to recognize and remain vigilant about the utilization of social media for marketing and sales purposes. Those managing lifestyle-focused social media accounts must uphold the same professional standards, ensuring the dissemination of accurate and evidence-based information.[14]
7. All pharmacy professionals managing social media accounts on behalf of student or professional organizations are entrusted with the responsibility to ensure all shared content is fact-based, objective, and approved by relevant authorities. This commitment

to accuracy and professionalism upholds the integrity of the organization and fosters credibility within the community.[15]

Collaborating Respectfully with Health Care Colleagues

Although social media can and should be used to promote healthy debate around health care and pharmacy practice, such debate should be conducted in a respectful manner. Reasoned debate and constructive criticism are important components of professional discourse. However, pharmacy professionals should avoid using social media to make ad hominem comments, which are personal attacks directed at an individual rather than addressing the substance of their post. Similarly, pharmacy professionals should not needlessly denigrate specific care providers, institutions, or professions. Instead, these platforms should be used to share updates on clinical guidelines, industry trends, educational opportunities, and evidence that advances patient care and the profession.

Patient Privacy

Health care professionals have long confronted the challenge of "communicat[ing] freely with each other while maintaining patient confidentiality and privacy."[16] Social media, by its very nature, presents new issues of privacy and confidentiality by extending the reach of communication. The following recommendations may help pharmacy professionals protect patient privacy and confidentiality as they navigate this new terrain.

1. Pharmacy professionals should continue to adhere to all laws, regulations, standards, and other mandates intended to protect patient privacy and confidentiality in all environments, including social media.

2. Pharmacy professionals should exercise professional judgment and employ established best practices to ensure compliance with privacy requirements when communicating with patients or about specific patient cases on social media.[17]
3. Pharmacy professionals should select privacy settings in social media accounts that provide the greatest degree of protection for personal information, keeping in mind that privacy settings are not perfect and that information posted online is likely permanent. Continuous review of privacy settings is necessary, as social media sites regularly change privacy policies and terms of use.

Conclusion

Social media has become an important mode of communication and is increasingly used for personal, professional, and business communication, while also supporting patient care. As medical professionals are held to high standards of personal, professional, ethical, and moral conduct, pharmacy professionals have a responsibility to use social media with the utmost integrity.

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