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Social media has become ever-present in society. It has permeated every aspect of everyday life and has both positive and negative influences on individuals and groups. Used wisely, social media can be a powerful learning tool, providing opportunities for connection and networking. It offers immediate access to news, resources and knowledge. Conversely, it can have adverse effects on mental health and contribute to the spread of misinformation.

The immediate nature of this medium can pose a risk as it allows little time for reflective thought and carries the added burden of posted content being discoverable by a court of law, even when it is deleted.

Nurses are welcome to use social media in their personal lives. Nurses can positively use electronic media to share workplace experiences, particularly those events that are challenging or emotionally charged, but it is imperative not to mention patients by name or provide any information or details that could possibly identify them to protect patients' right to privacy.



## SOCIAL MEDIA IN HEALTH CARE

Social media can benefit health care in a variety of ways, including fostering professional connections, promoting timely communication with patients and family members, and educating and informing consumers and health care professionals. Social media provides nurses with a way to express their feelings, and reflect or seek support from friends, colleagues, peers or virtually anyone online.

Journaling and reflective practice are recognized as effective tools in nursing practice, and the Internet provides an alternative media for nurses to engage in these helpful activities. Without a sense of caution, however, these understandable needs and potential benefits may result in the nurse disclosing too much information and violating patient privacy and confidentiality.

Health care organizations that utilize electronic and social media typically have policies governing employee use of such media in the workplace. Components of these policies often address personal use of employer computers and equipment, personal computing during work hours, and the types of websites that can be accessed from employer computers. Health care organizations also maintain careful

control of websites maintained by or associated with the organization, limiting what may be posted to the site and by whom.

The employer's policies, however, typically do not address the nurse's use of social media to discuss workplace issues outside of work on home computers, personally owned phones and other handheld electronic devices. It is in this context that the nurse may face potentially serious consequences for the inappropriate use of social media.

*Jamie has been working in hospice care for the last six years and one of her patients, Maria, maintained a hospital-sponsored communication page to keep friends and family updated on her battle with cancer. One day, Maria posted about her depression. As her nurse, Jamie wanted to provide support, so she posted, "I know the last week has been difficult. Hopefully the new happy pill will help, along with the increased dose of morphine. I will see you on Wednesday." The site automatically listed the user's name with each comment. The next day, Jamie was shopping at the local grocery store when a friend stopped her to ask about Maria's condition. "I saw your post yesterday. I didn't know you were taking care of Maria," the friend said. "I hope that new medication helps with her pain."*

This is an example of a violation of confidentiality through social media. While Jamie had Maria's best intentions at heart by trying to offer her words of support, she inadvertently disclosed information about a patient on a social media site. Everyone who read that post now knows about Maria's medication and increase in morphine, violating her right to privacy and confidentiality. Instances of inappropriate use of electronic media by nurses such as this have been reported to boards of nursing (BONs) and, in some cases, to the media.

## C FIDELITY AND DISCRETION

To understand the limits of appropriate use of social media, it is important to have an understanding of confidentiality and privacy in the health care context.

Confidentiality and privacy are related, but distinct concepts:

- Any patient information learned by the nurse during the course of treatment must be safeguarded by that nurse.
- Such information may only be disclosed to other members of the health care team for the purpose of providing care for the patient.
- Confidential information should be shared only with the patient's informed consent, when legally required or where failure to disclose the information could result in significant harm. Beyond these very limited exceptions, a2 (a)(6)(i)1.4 (e)4

disclosed to persons no longer involved in the care of a patient. Even though Bob made an honest mistake, confidentiality rules must be

*Emily, a 20-year-old nursing student, wasn't aware of the potential repercussions that could occur when she took a photo of Tommy, a 3-year-old leukemia patient in a pediatric unit, on her personal cell phone. When Tommy's mom went to the cafeteria, Emily asked him if she could take his picture, and Tommy immediately said yes. Emily took his picture as she wheeled him into his room. She posted Tommy's photo on her Facebook page with this caption: "This is my 3-year-old leukemia patient who is bravely receiving chemotherapy! He is the reason I am so proud to be a nurse!" In the photo, Room 324 of the pediatric unit was visible. Days later, the dean of the nursing program called Emily into her office. A nurse from the hospital found the photo Emily posted of Tommy on Facebook and reported to hospital leadership.*



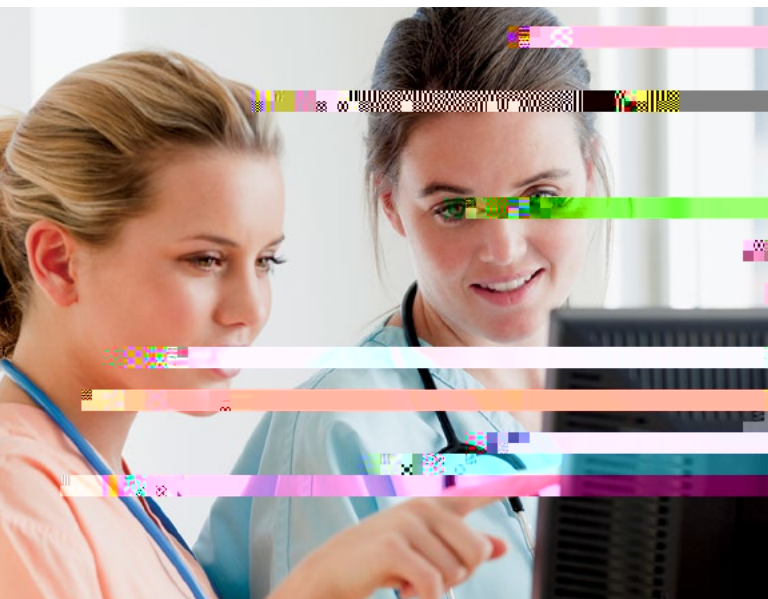


## SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON THE NURSING PROFESSION

Another concern arising from social media misuse is its effect on team-based patient care. Online comments by a nurse regarding co-workers, even if posted from home during nonwork hours, may constitute lateral violence. Lateral violence includes disruptive behaviors of intimidation and bullying, which may be perpetuated in person or via the Internet. This is sometimes referred to as "cyberbullying." Such activity is a cause for concern for current and future employers, and regulators because they negatively affect team-based care, thus creating patient-safety ramifications.

The line between speech protected by labor laws, the First Amendment and the ability of an employer to impose expectations on employees outside of work is still being determined.

Nonetheless, negative comments can be detrimental to a cohesive health care delivery team and may result in sanctions against the nurse.











## HE CARE CHALLENGE

- Be aware.
- Be cognizant of feelings and behavior.
- Be observant of the behavior of other professionals.
- Always act in the best interest of the patient.

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