

Alberta Doctors' Digest

A physician's guide to navigating social media

Alberta Medical Association President Dr. Shelley Duggan knows firsthand the power of social media for health advocacy. Long before assuming her presidency, Dr. Duggan used platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) to educate and share professional insights with the public.

"You can get a fair amount of information out that way, and it's easier than the way it was traditionally when you relied on print media and radio and television," Dr. Duggan says.

With its vast reach, social media has become a powerful tool for physicians to engage in health advocacy. But experts say there are some key factors to weigh before stepping into the digital spotlight.

Engage with professionalism

First and foremost, physician conduct should always be underpinned by professionalism, says Dr. Caroline Ehrat, Director of Medico-Legal Services at the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA).

"It's true whether you're in your office, in the hospital, engaging with colleagues or patients or engaging with social media," Dr. Ehrat says. "It's how we are held to our standard of behaviour that the public expects of us, that we expect of ourselves and that the College expects of us."

"It's really important that you're mindful about what you say and how you say it, and always assume that what you're saying on social media is on the front page and viewed by everyone."

Consider using separate personal and professional accounts

The CMPA encourages physicians to keep personal and professional social accounts separate. But Dr. Ehrat cautions that the lines between personal and professional views can still be blurred.

"Many people will know that you are a physician, so it's not to say that you can say what you wish on a personal account and it won't be subject to a complaint that's brought to your regulatory body or hospital, for example."

Know the limits of free speech

Jon Rossall, leader of the Health Law Practice Group at McLennan Ross LLP, says it's important to be aware of how personal expression can cross into the realm of professional misconduct.

"Physicians are citizens – they're people also, and they're entitled to their views and

opinions on things,” Jon says. “But there is a limit on that right which is imposed by our College and by their codes of ethics.”

One of these limits, he cautions, is advocating for medical views that contradict established knowledge. “If that expression of advocacy strays into, for example, an area of hate literature, or clearly something which is widely and universally known to be untrue, and they’re advocating it in their position as a physician, that is problematic,” Jon says.

Stick to your area of expertise

Scott McLeod, Registrar & CEO at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, stresses the importance of commenting on health topics that are within a physician’s specialty area.

“If you look at CPSA’s *Code of Ethics and Professionalism*, it actually recommends that physicians be cautious not to overstep the limits of their knowledge and skills,” Scott says. “Physicians have a lot of expertise and a lot of training, but in very specific areas. When you’re making comments, we ask that physicians provide those comments within their area of expertise.”

Avoid establishing therapeutic relationships

Physicians must avoid providing personalized medical advice during advocacy efforts, Dr. Ehrat cautions.

She uses the example of educating followers on the benefits of reducing high cholesterol levels. This activity would be considered appropriate advocacy until the physician was to advise an individual on how to lower their cholesterol or which medications they should take.

“That changes your general health promotion to information that’s specific to an individual, and that can be viewed as having established a doctor-patient relationship, which means you need to maintain the standard of care that you would be expected to manage in your office,” she notes.

Protect patient privacy

Maintaining patient confidentiality in clinical settings tends to be well understood, Dr. Ehrat says, but there can be grey area when it comes to public advocacy. “Some people falsely believe that just because they don’t use their patient’s name that they can exchange information without violating privacy,” Dr. Ehrat explains. “In fact, it’s very hard to de-identify information sufficiently when you’re discussing it with colleagues or on a social media group.”

Jon adds that for highly specialized physicians who work with a specific demographic, sharing even vague anecdotes can risk identifying patients, or having patients identify themselves. “When a physician starts advocating on behalf of those individuals, it becomes much easier for a reader or listener to come close to identifying who those patients might be.”

Listen to the full interviews

Resources

CMPA

- [How to engage and advocate safely on social media](#) (webinar)
- [10 tips for using social media in professional practice](#)
- [Participating in health advocacy](#)
- [Advocacy for change: An important role to undertake with care](#)
- [Social media: The opportunities, the realities](#)

CPSA

- [Advice to the Profession: Social media](#)

Alberta Medical Association

- Social media training for physicians: 101 introductory and 201 advanced led by Dr. Shazma Mithani. Coming soon to AMA Learning Management System course lists. To be notified when courses are available, please email: webmaster@albertadoctors.org

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