Position Statement

Social Media Use by Laboratory Professionals

The Canadian Society for Medical Laboratory Science (CSMLS) believes that laboratory professionals need to be fully aware of the positive and negative implications of their online actions through social media and consider the potential impact that their interactions on such platforms can have on how they are perceived as professionals.

Laboratory professionals should always be mindful that the content posted to social media sites can reach the public domain regardless of the intention to keep such information private. Laboratory professionals should never rely on a social media platform's privacy setting to be absolute and should always consider the potential professional implications of any content that is posted.

Laboratory professionals should be aware that their actions online reflect on them as a professional and can positively and negatively impact their current and future employment opportunities. It is a growing practice to screen the social media presence of job candidates and that screening process can sway an employer's decision in a positive or negative manner.

Social Media

Social media is defined as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated information. Current social media platforms include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest. This landscape is dynamic and constantly evolving with new platforms coming and going at a rapid pace.

Benefits of social media use

It is worth noting that there are a many beneficial uses of social media in the laboratory community, including:
- Promoting the laboratory profession and shaping the reputation of laboratory professionals
- Promoting your employer's or educational institute's programs and accomplishments
- Sharing evidence-based information and best practices with peers and other health care professionals
- Promoting and sharing research
- Personal and professional networking
- Enhancement of employment prospects
- Using social media as a teaching tool for laboratory students in the classroom and clinical placements

Risks of social media use

Laboratory professionals and students must be aware of the professional and legal risks associated with inappropriate use of social media. These risks include:

- Breach of patient or health information privacy
- Breach of confidentiality
- Violation of professional standards of practice
- Damage to personal or professional reputation
- Harassment or defamation claims by peers, colleagues or other health care professionals.

Laboratory professionals and laboratory students who do not approach social media with careful consideration can harm their patients, their employer, their educational institution and themselves. Violations may result in disciplinary actions by regulatory colleges ranging up to and including loss or suspension of license, disciplinary actions by employers ranging up to and including termination, disciplinary actions by educational institutions ranging up to and including expulsion, and possible civil or criminal proceedings.

A framework for accountable social media use

Accountable use of social media requires thoughtful consideration on the part of the laboratory professional or student. A helpful framework for evaluating your online behaviour is to look at your actions through the following lenses:

Legislation

Online behaviour, just like behaviour in the real world, must adhere to all federal and provincial legislation. Laws governing behaviour, such as defamation or threats for

example, extend to online actions as well as real world actions. Laboratory professionals and students need to pay specific attention to legislation regarding patient privacy and the protection of health information.

Employer/Educational Institution Policy

It is the responsibility of the laboratory professional to be aware of all employer policies. Laboratory students should be aware of all educational institution policies as well as the employer policies of your clinical placement. You should be cognizant of the fact that policies, such as those that deal with bullying or harassment, may extend to online actions whether the policy specifically mentions online behaviour or not. In your role, you may have access to confidential or privileged information and inappropriate disclosure of such information on social media or by any other means may breach employer policies.

Professional Standards

It is the responsibility of the laboratory professional to be aware of all professional standards (i.e. Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct, etc.) set forth by their provincial regulatory body and their provincial or national professional associations. Laboratory professionals should also be mindful of professional boundaries when engaging on social media. Communicating or "friending" patients on social media can blur professional lines and possibly extend the scope of professional responsibility.

Social and Professional Norms

Online behaviour must meet the accepted norms of your personal and professional spheres. This is a somewhat abstract concept; however you may be judged based on whether your peers and social media contacts believe your online actions adhere to these norms or not. It may be helpful to consider what subject matter is appropriate to discuss with friends and colleagues. Subject matter such as religion, sex or politics may be either appropriate or taboo. Will a joke you tell be considered funny or offensive? These norms are not hard and fast. You have to decide for yourself whether the content you post online reflects your professional self or not and act accordingly.

Recommendations

Laboratory professionals and students should:

- Abide by organizational policies concerning personal and professional social media use
- Be aware of the privacy settings associated with all social media platforms
- Maintain patient privacy and the protection of health information
- Maintain professional boundaries with patients
- Refrain from posting unprofessional or negative comments about patients, fellow students or educators, coworkers or other health care professionals, and employers
- All social media presences, whether private or professional, should be treated

and managed with professionalism in mind
- Never speak on behalf of your organization unless authorized to do so
- Use social media to build and nurture their professional reputation
- Use social media to enhance the understanding and recognition of laboratory professionals

Employers should:

- Provide employees with clear expectations as to their use of social media through a social media policy which:
  - Reflects the mission, vision and values of the organization
  - Sets forth clear rules for conduct and implications for violations
  - Identifies what information employees are and are not able to share
  - Identifies a resource for employees if they have questions or are unsure about their social media use
- Incorporate their social media policy as part of orientation or onboarding procedures as well as refresher training for existing staff

Educators should:

- Provide students with training around the appropriate use of social media
- Incorporate professionalism in the curriculum
- Encourage the positive uses of social media

References

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Created: June 2016
Reviewed: May 19, 2019