

## **Digital Professionalism**

### **The Use of Social Media by AHPR registrants, Board & Committee members**

Your conduct as an AHPR registrant, both online and offline, is important. The way you act online may jeopardise your entitlement to stay on the AHPR register.

The popularity of social media has grown rapidly with widespread use of sites such as *Facebook*, *Instagram* and *Twitter* amongst veterinary professionals. There are also a number of well-established blogs and internet forums that are aimed specifically at veterinary professionals as a method of self-promotion and information sharing for clients.

While many veterinary professionals use social media without encountering any difficulties, media interest and research into examples of unprofessional behaviour online have raised concerns that some professionals may be unknowingly exposing themselves to risk. Although veterinary professionals should be free to take advantage of the many personal and professional benefits that social media can offer, it is important that registrants are aware of the potential risks involved. This guidance provides practical and ethical advice on the different issues that our registrants may encounter when using social media.

#### **Key Points for Digital Professionalism**

(adapted from BMA guidance *Using Social Media; Practical and ethical advice for doctors and medical students*)

##### **1. Keep your personal and professional life separate as far as possible.**

- Social media can blur the boundary between an individual's public and professional lives.
- Adopt conservative privacy settings where these are available but be aware that not all information can be protected on the web; your 'friends' can forward material you intended to be private.
- AHPR registrants should be conscious of their online image and how it may impact on their professional standing.
- Consider the professional implications of accepting *Facebook* requests from current or former clients.

##### **2. The ethical duty to protect client and patient confidentiality applies equally on the internet as to other media.**

- It would be inappropriate to post informal, personal or derogatory comments about clients, patients or colleagues on public internet forums, or images of patients without the owner's permission.

### **3. Defamation law can apply to any comments posted on the web made in either a personal or professional capacity.**

- A large number of posts and shared posts are seen on *Facebook* each day. Do not share anything that may lead to accusations of slander or cause emotional distress. You may not know the true story behind the post. Do not get involved or dragged into such situations! If you have genuine concerns about an animal's welfare there are proper routes to follow to raise these and have them investigated.

Social media can offer many professional and personal benefits. It can provide opportunities for professional networking and enables geographical barriers to be broken down. In addition to the benefits, it is important that there is an awareness of the potential risks involved as mentioned above.

#### ***Keep your professional and personal life separate as far as possible***

- For example, you could keep *Facebook* just for close friends and family or set up a separate profile for business use, clients could be asked to "like" this page but do not accept "friend" requests; use *Twitter* for sharing information with people you may not know, and use *LinkedIn* for building and maintaining professional relationships.
- If you identify yourself as an AHPR registrant on Facebook, you should act responsibly at all times and uphold the reputation of your profession. But even if you do not identify yourself as an AHPR registrant, be aware that your conduct online could still jeopardise your registration if it calls your fitness to practise into question.
- Remember that everything you post online is public, even with the strictest privacy settings. Once something is online, it can be copied and redistributed, and it is easy to lose control of it. Presume everything you post online will be permanent and will be shared.
- There is currently a debate about whether or not information is ever deleted from social media sites. Information published on social media is not always easily removable, particularly when this information comes from a third party.

#### ***Protect your own privacy***

- Think through what kinds of information you want to share and with whom, and adjust your privacy settings.
- On *Facebook*, you can adjust your privacy settings at group level to share different levels of information with different kinds of friends.
- Remember that the more your personal life is exposed through social networking sites, the more likely it is that this could have a negative impact.

### ***Be professional***

- Do not use social networks to build or pursue relationships with clients and service users, even if their animal is no longer in your care.
- If you receive a friendship request from a current or former client, *Facebook* allows you to ignore this request without the person being informed, avoiding the need to give unnecessary offence.
- Do not discuss work related issues online, including conversations about patients or complaints about colleagues. Even when anonymised, these are likely to be inappropriate.
- If your mobile phone has a camera, you should not use it in the workplace without permission.
- Never post pictures of patients or service users unless they have given you specific consent to do so.
- Social networking sites should not be used for raising and escalating concerns (commonly known as 'whistleblowing').

You can take action if you find yourself the target of complaints or abuse on social networking sites. You can remove someone from your friend list and block them from interacting with you, and most sites will include mechanisms to report abusive activity and provide support for users who are subject to abuse from others. If you are very concerned about someone else's behaviour online, you should take steps to raise your concern, if necessary with their employer, professional association or AHPR. In the most serious circumstances, for example if someone's use of a social networking site is unlawful, you should also report the incident to the police.

## **Social Media and Professionalism**

### **Posting Comments and Opinions**

Personal integrity is central to your role as a veterinary professional and must characterise all of your professional dealings. You should think about how you, your employer and your business' image may be affected by any comments you make or photos/videos you upload, and the potential impact this may have on your professional standing. One misplaced comment or opinion from a professional may not only damage that individual's reputation but could reflect negatively on the profession more generally.

**You should regularly review the content of your personal social media channels, which will enable you to remove any information that you feel could reflect negatively on you or you are not comfortable with.**