CPD4dentalnurses

YOUR FUTURE IN YOUR HANDS

Legal and Ethical: Social Media and Professional and Ethical Responsibilities for Dental Profressionals

Aims: This article aims to give an overview on the different types of social media and how to use them effectively whilst maintaining professional and ethical responsibilities as a dental care professional.

Objectives: On completion of this verifiable CPD article the participant will be able to demonstrate, through completion of a questionnaire, the ability to:

- Define social media and social media types
- Demonstrate knowledge of the most popular social media platforms
- Demonstrate an understanding of professionalism and ethics as they relate to the dental care professional's online activities
- Demonstrate knowledge of the General Dental Council's regulations relating to the use of social media
- List recommendations for protecting patient information and limiting the dental care professional's liability when using social media
- Have knowledge of the Governments SHARE checklist to help stop the spread of harmful content

Introduction

Social Networking may have transformed your professional and personal life, but it is important to realise that your ethical responsibilities as a Dental Care Professional (DCP) still apply online, as the General Dental Council (GDC) guidance makes clear.

The role of the DCP goes far beyond the walls of the dental practice and dental professionals are required to bridge the standards of ethical principles, sound judgement, and good moral character to the world of social media.

By increasing understanding and awareness on how these two worlds intersect, DCP's can gain a clearer perspective on the benefits and risks of using social media in both professional and personal settings.

What is Social Media?

Social Media is defined as "websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking."[1] As such, social media includes blogs and internet forums as well as social networking and media sharing sites.

As of January 2024, the United Kingdom (UK) was home to 56.2 million active social media users which is a social media penetration rate of 82.8% of the population of the UK.[2]

The table below shows ten popular social networks in the UK in 2023, although the number of registered users is constantly changing.[3]

Name	Description	Number of UK Registered Users	Additional Information
Facebook	A social sharing networking site	44,840,000	Users aged 25-34 years made up 24.5% of all users in the UK, in Sept 2022.
You Tube	Used for video uploading and viewing. 35% of the	57,100,000	35% of the UK population are an active user of You Tube.

	UK population actively use the website		
LinkedIn	Platform for networking professionally	34,900,000	Content creation on LinkedIn increases 60% year-on-year. LinkedIn Live streams increased by 437% over 2022-2023.
WhatsApp	Platform for sending text messages, voice and video calls	31,160,000	Available in 60 languages. There are over 50 million WhatsApp Business users.
Instagram	Photo and video sharing social networking	31,160,000	Instagram generated $43.2 billion in ad revenue in 2022.
Snapchat	An App for sharing images and videos with a short lifespan	22,150,000	73% of 12-27 years olds are on Snapchat.
X (formally)Twitter	A micro blogging platform	19,050,000	350,000 are posted every minute.
Tik Tok	Video creation and sharing application	23,380,000	41% of Tik Tok users are aged between 16 and 24.
Pinterest	A visual discovery engine for finding ideas like recipes, home and style inspiration	16,700,000	As of January 2023, 72.6% of Pintrest's audience in the UK were female.

The following graph shows the most popular social media platforms by usage reach[2]

Most Popular social media platforms in the UK as of the third quarter of 2023, by usage reach
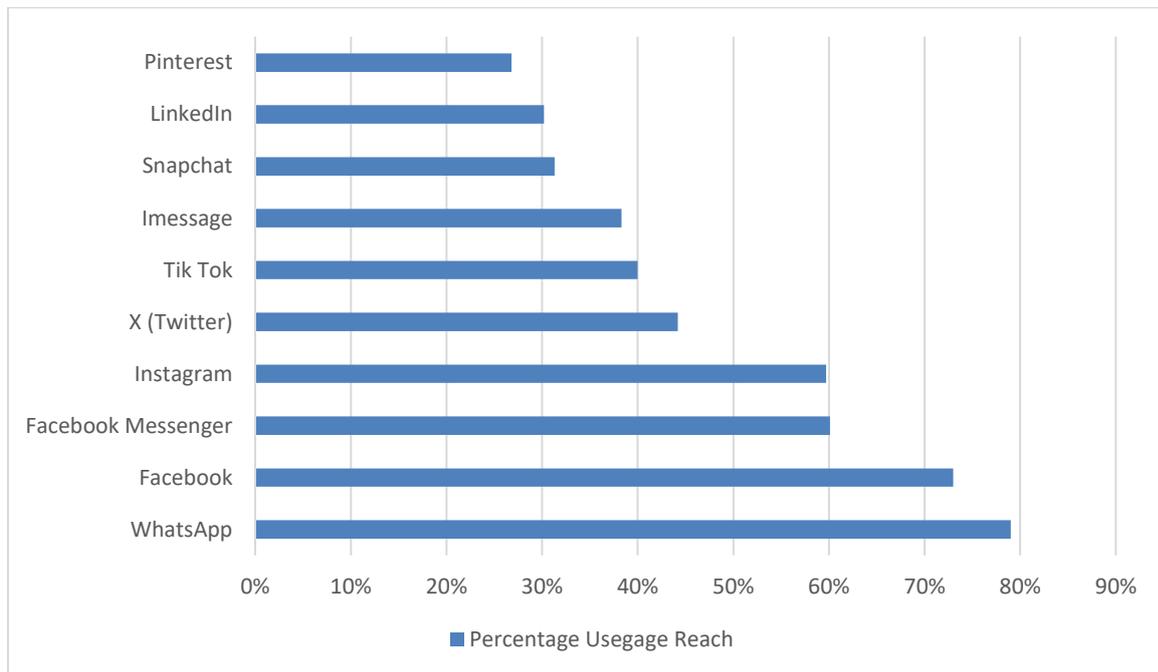
Social media and the use of smaller, portable work and recreational gadgets has increased rapidly over recent years. The Office for National Statistics latest statistics, report that, in 2021, 92% of all adults in the UK had recently used the internet (within 3 months), up from 91% in 2019. 99% of all adults aged 16-44 years in the UK had recently used the internet, compared with 54% of adults aged 75 years and over. [4]

Worldwide, there are over 2.96 billion monthly active Facebook users. On average, Facebook users open the app at least eight times a day.[5] Facebook has many groups for dental nurses- including CPD4dentalnurses, so do click to join us https://www.facebook.com/CPD4DentalNurses/ .

Social media can be an important tool in a dental professional's life for education, promotion, and networking. Some of the dental groups available on social networking sites can be useful for education purposes and advice. However, it is also important to realise that a lot of what is posted online or on social media may not be evidence based.

The GDC have recognised the increasing role that social media is playing in society and have incorporated social media guidance into the Standards for Dental Professionals.

General Dental Council Standards

The GDC Standards for Dental Professionals "sets out the standards of conduct, performance and ethics" that govern dental professionals.[6]

There are nine principles that registered dental professionals must keep to at all times. GDC registrants must:

- ➢ Put patients' interests first
- ➢ Communicate effectively with patients
- ➢ Obtain valid consent
- ➢ Maintain and protect patients' information
- ➢ Have a clear and effective complaints procedure
- ➢ Work with colleagues in a way that is in patients' best interests
- ➢ Maintain, develop, and work within your professional knowledge and skills
- ➢ Raise concerns if patients are at risk
- ➢ Make sure your personal behaviour maintains patients' confidence in you and the dental profession[6]

9.1 You must ensure that your conduct, both at work and in your personal life, justifies patients trust in you and the public's trust in the dental profession.

9.1.3 You should not publish anything that could affect patients' and the public's confidence in you, or the dental profession, in any public media, unless this is done as part of raising a concern. Public media includes social networking sites, blogs, and other social media. In particular, you must not make personal, inaccurate or derogatory comments about patients or colleagues.

The GDC state that when using social media dental professionals must:

1) Maintain and protect patients' information

Confidentiality can be defined as "the statutory and professional duty to safeguard personal information by preventing its improper disclosure."[7] Confidentiality is protected by the Human Rights Act 1998 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2018).

When using social media, the GDC remind dental professionals that care must be taken to ensure that information is not published that could identify patients, unless explicit consent has been given. The duty of confidentiality to patients applies online as well as online.   If professional social media is used for the purpose of discussing best practice, it is important that care is taken to ensure that a patient or patients are not able to be identified. The confidentiality of a patient extends to photographs, radiographs and any audio or video recordings. Even if a patient is not actually named, it may still be possible for them to be identified by other means.[6]

The GDC acknowledge that discussions about anonymised patients and best practice can have an educational and professional benefit. However, dental professionals need to consider that posting information under another name does not guarantee confidentiality.

The GDC also remind dental professionals that social media must not be used as a mechanism to raise concerns about the possible abuse of children or vulnerable adults. Any concerns of this nature should be referred to the appropriate authority.

2) Maintain appropriate boundaries in the relationships with your patients

The GDC state that dental professionals should "think carefully before accepting friend requests from patients."[6] In a medical survey, it was found that 34% of practicing physicians received friend requests from patients.[8] The Dental Defence Union observe that a friend request on Facebook, or other sites, has the capacity to blur the ethical line in the professional relationship and should not be encouraged, however impolite it may seem to ignore or decline the request.[9]

A dental professional's relationship with their patients must remain professional at all times. Friend requests on social media are different to friendships that are formed in everyday life. With a social media friend request, you are receiving a request to form a network connection between the two profiles. It is important to realise that and individuals' connections on both networks will also be able to see this connection.

It is suggested that personal and professional content is kept separate. Thus, if a patient requests to connect on social media, the dental professional could, where possible, direct the patient to a professional profile or the dental practice page instead.

The GDC state that discussions with patients regarding treatment must not be conducted on social media.

## 3) Comply with any internet and social media policy set for you by your employer

From a business perspective, social media offers the dental practice the potential to reach out to the widest possible number of new patients at the lowest marketing cost per patient. Compared to any other form of advertising and marketing, social networking is one that requires the least amount of time, effort, and money, and has the potential to achieve the highest results. Therefore, social networking can be used to build a practice profile and used as a platform to promote services and provide information to patients.[10] Any information that is posted on the practice profile should comply with the GDC's guidance on advertising which can be accessed at the end of this article.

Despite the above positive applications of social media, the actions of the dental team can also have a negative impact on the dental practice profile. For this reason, it is recommended that each dental practice has a social media policy that all dental

professionals should follow during activities on the internet. The policy should incorporate guidance on:

- Personal use
- Business use
- Consent

**4) Be careful not to publish anything that could affect patients' confidence in you, or the dental profession**
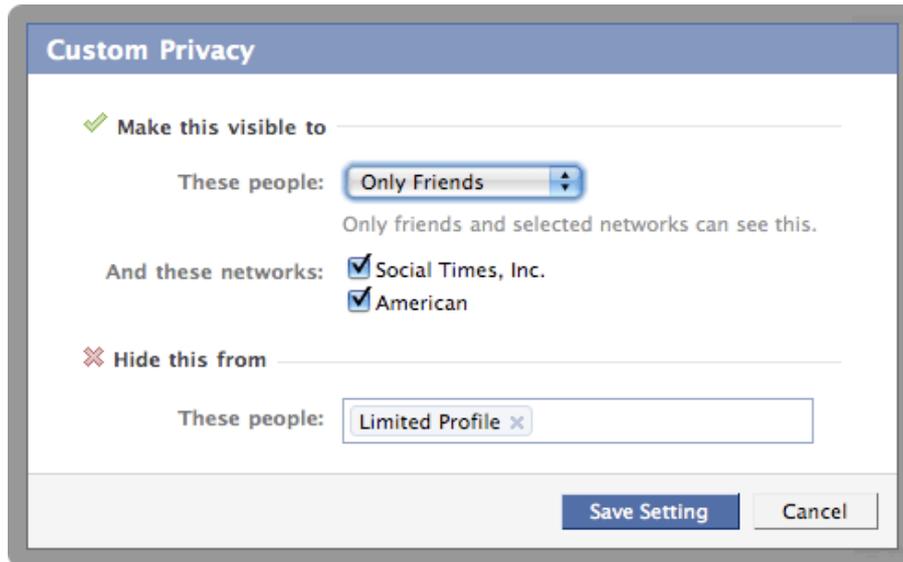
A group of DCPs came under scrutiny when a Facebook group was set up called "I am a dental nurse and I hate patients because……." In addition, a group of DCPs in California lost their jobs and faced disciplinary action for discussing a patient on Facebook. Most employers can also legally terminate employees for making disparaging comments about their employer, co-workers or patients. Posting defamatory remarks on the internet can lead to civil lawsuits alleging defamation or slander.

A study was conducted to explore the prevalence of Social Media Fitness to Practice (FtP) cases. It was found that 2.4% of FtP cases from Sept 2013-June 2016 published on the GDC website in that period, were related to breaches in social media guidelines. In addition, all the case investigations were proven and upheld. Although a limitation of the study was that the sample size was small, most of the complaints were against dental nurses and the most common type of complaint was concerning inappropriate Facebook comments.[11]

It is important that dental professionals remember their duty to their patients and the public's trust in the profession. Privacy settings on all social media platforms should be reviewed regularly. There were allegations that Facebook data was manipulated by UK based Cambridge Analytica to influence a range of world events from Donald Trump's election to the Brexit vote. Due to demands for transparency from both Facebook users and government regulators, Facebook have made the process of managing your privacy easier.[12] Dental professionals should revisit their privacy settings and ensure that posts are only meant for the intended audience. However, the

GDC acknowledge that even the "strictest privacy settings do not guarantee that your information will be kept secure and any information that you post could be viewed by everyone including your patients, colleagues or employer."[6] Content can be reposted, copied, tweeted, and even changed many times over. Actions captured via images, posts or comments can be considered as a reflection on the dental practice and the profession, even if they did not occur during work hours.
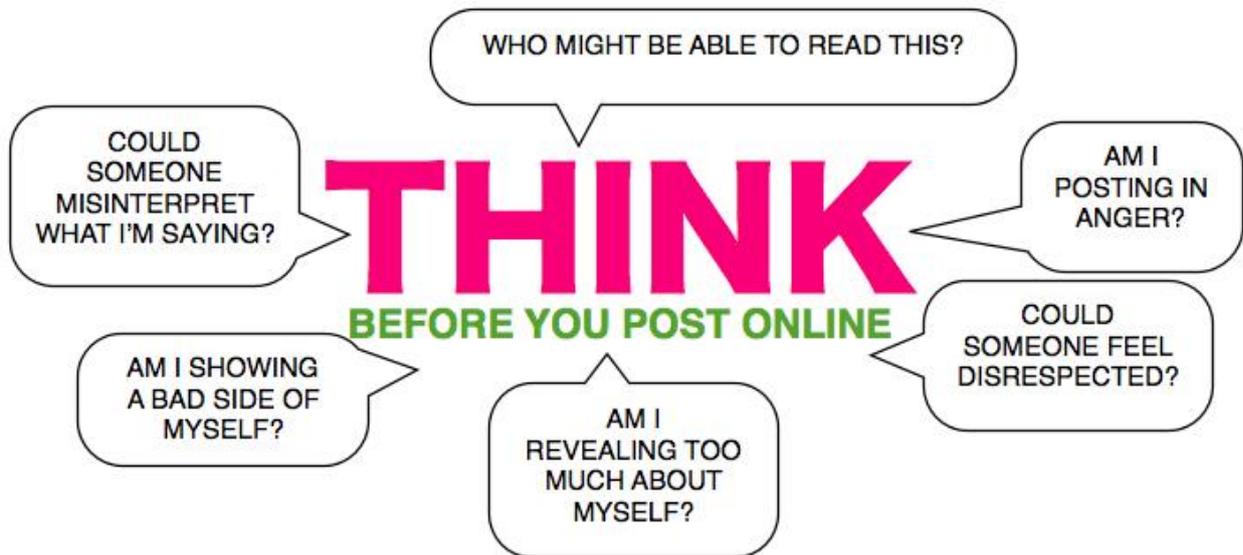
False information

One of the negatives of social media is the possibility of "Fake News". It is important that dental professionals are aware of this and do not share or believe everything that is communicated on social media. As an example, during the Pandemic, the Government launched a crackdown on the spread of false COVID-19 information. In March 2020, specialist teams were identifying approximately 70 incidents a week of false narratives containing multiple misleading claims.[13]

The Government has devised the following check list to consider before you like, comment or share online so that individuals are not contrinuting to the spread of harmful or misleading content.[14]

Think Before You Share

Before you like, comment or share content online, use the **SHARE checklist** to help you separate fact from disinformation.

S — SOURCE
Make sure information comes from a trusted source.

Have you heard of the source before? Do you ecognise the url, or website name? Is the source verified? Checking these things can help you determine if a source is reliable.

H — HEADLINE
Always read beyond the headline.

Headlines don't always tell the full story. Always check the date and read to the end before you share articles with family and friends.

A — ANALYSE
Check the facts.

If something sounds unbelievable, it very well might be. You can use fact-checking services which are correcting false information about important issues every day. Or check the fact with an official source such as GOV.UK or Full Fact.

R — RETOUCHED
Does the image or video look as though it has been doctored?

It might be edited, or show an unrelated place or event. Check to see if the photo matches what an article says. You can also reverse image search to determine the source of the image.

E — ERROR
Look out for bad grammar and spelling.

Typos and other errors are clues that the information could be false. Official guidance will always have been carefully checked.

SHAREChecklist

UK Government

Conclusion

The use of social media is increasing and has many professional and social benefits. However, dental professionals need to remember the professional standing they hold in society and must ensure they abide to General Dental Council standards, GDPR and social media practice policy when posting on-line.

Personal Development Plan and Reflective Learning

This CPD is linked to the following GDC Enhanced CPD Development Outcome:

D. Maintenance of skills, behaviours and attitudes which maintain patient confidence in you and the dental profession and put patients' interests first.

Reflective learning is now a requirement of the GDC Enhanced Professional Development Scheme. As such, you will now need to answer some reflective learning questions, before your certificate is generated.

Examples will be provided. Please remember that you will be given the opportunity to fill this in on completion of the exam but you can also update this at any time from your CPD log. If you take a few moments to write your reflection on completion, you will have fulfilled the Enhanced CPD requirements.

Further Reading

 GDC Guidance on Social Media
GDC Advertising Guidance

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