

# MEDICAL AND DENTAL PRACTITIONERS COUNCIL OF ZIMBABWE



## SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

### PREAMBLE

Social media can be used for both personal and professional purposes. The professionals are now using social media in their practices to interact with colleagues and patients, to seek out medical information online, and to share content with a broad personal and professional audiences.

Whether engaging in social media for personal or professional use, the nature of these platforms, which are highly accessible, informal, and public, raise important questions about the steps medical profession should take to uphold their important professional obligations while online.

### 1. DEFINATION OF TERMS

#### **In these regulations**

Social media refers to " web and mobile technologies and practices that people use to share content, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives online."

Social media platforms -refers to " online communication by Facebook, twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, and blogging sites, among many others.

Medical profession refers to -" registered medical or dental practitioner"

### 2. PURPOSE OF THE GUIDELINES

This document provides guidance to the medical professionals on how to engage in social media while continuing to meet relevant legal, professional, and ethical obligations.

It also clarifies how existing professional expectations can be met in the social media sphere.

### 3. COUNCIL POSITION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The medical profession is expected to comply with existing professional expectations, including those set out in relevant legislation, codes of ethics, and Council Policies when engaging in the use of social media platforms and technologies.

Council recognizes that social media platforms may present important opportunities to enhance patient care, medical education, professional competence, and collegiality, among other potential benefits.

#### **4. RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS**

Legal and professional expectations that govern medical practice are set out in the Council's Codes of Conduct, Policies, and relevant legislation. A number of these obligations are relevant to the use of social media by the medical profession and are articulated below.

These obligations are not unique to social media, but apply to medical practice in general, and must be met by all registered medical and dental practitioners.

##### **4.1 They are as follows:**

1. Comply with all legal and professional obligations to maintain patient privacy and confidentiality.
2. Maintain appropriate professional boundaries with patients and those close to them.
3. Maintain professional and respectful relationships with patients, colleagues, and other members of the health-care team
4. Comply with relevant legislation with respect to advertising professional services
5. Comply with the law related to defamation, copyright, and plagiarism when posting content online.
6. Avoid conflict of interest.
7. Always take a conservative approach when posting content on social media platforms.

#### **5. GUIDELINES**

In order to satisfy the above professional expectations while engaging in social media, it is recommended that the profession should:

1. Assume that all content on the Internet is public and accessible to all.
2. Exercise caution when posting information online that relates to an actual patient, to ensure compliance with legal and professional obligations to maintain privacy and confidentiality.
3. Bear in mind that an unnamed patient may still be identified through a range of other information, such as a description of their clinical condition, or area of residence.
4. Refrain from providing clinical advice to specific patients through social media.—It is acceptable, however, to use social media to disseminate generic medical or health information for educational or information sharing purposes.
5. Protect the reputation of the profession, the practitioner's individual reputation and the public trust by not posting content that could be viewed as unprofessional.
6. Be mindful of their Internet presence and be proactive in removing content posted by themselves or others which may be viewed as unprofessional.
7. Refrain from establishing personal connections with patients or persons closely associated with them online, as this may not allow practitioners to maintain appropriate professional boundaries and may compromise the practitioner's objectivity.
8. Only create an online connection with patients for professional purposes only.
9. Refrain from seeking out patient information that may be available online without prior consent.

10. Read, understand, and apply the strictest privacy settings necessary to maintain control over access to their personal information, and social media presence undertaken for personal purposes only.
11. Remember that social media platforms are constantly evolving and be proactive in considering how professional expectations apply in any given set of circumstances.

## 6. ENDNOTES

- a. A breach of confidentiality may be deemed to have occurred if the facts available are sufficient for the patient to be identified, even if only by themselves.
- b. Clinical advice is defined as advice of a clinical nature that is directed toward a specific individual to address a medical concern. It is distinct from general health information that is not patient-specific but disseminated to a general audience for education or information sharing purposes.
- c. Be mindful that once information has been posted online, it may be difficult or impossible to remove. Reasonable steps should be taken to remove information that has been posted by oneself or others.
- d. Some doctors may if preferable maintain a separate online presence for their personal and professional networks."
- e. Patients are entitled to a reasonable expectation of privacy. While doctors are expected to adhere to all their relevant legal obligations under the Council policies and regulations with respect to the collection of personal health information, they should also refrain from seeking out other types of non-protected information online without prior consent.

## 7. CONTRAVENTION OF THE PROVISIONS OF THE POLICY

A contravention of any provision of this Policy by a registered practitioner will result in action being taken against the practitioner by Council in terms of Section 112 of the Health Professions Act (Chapter 21:19).

### *Sources*

*Ireland Medical Council*

*New Zealand Medical Council*

*Health Professions Act (Chapter 27:19)*

**Approved by Council 07/07/2022**

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*22/07/2022*

