

UTHSCSA Graduate Medical Education Policies

Section 5	Information Management	Effective:	May 2010
		Revised:	January 2015
Policy 5.2	Use of Internet and Social Networking Sites	Responsibility:	Vice Dean for Graduate Medical Education

Use of Internet and Social Networking Sites

Purpose Social and business networking Web sites (e.g. My Space, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, You Tube, others) are increasingly used for communication and have enormous potential for both physicians and their patients. Social medical can be used to disseminate information and forge meaningful professional relationships. However, these benefits must occur within the proper framework of professional ethics. The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to residents regarding appropriate and ethical use of social networking sites.

Policy The goal of this policy is to encourage residents who use social media and social networking to protect themselves from unintended consequences of such practices and to maintain the public trust by:

- Acting with professionalism, with awareness of potential persistence of posted text and images
- Protecting the privacy and confidentiality of their patients
- Being aware that information they post online may be available to anyone, and could be misconstrued
- Avoiding requests for and provision of online medical advice
- Being forthcoming about their employment, credentials and conflicts of interest

Guiding Principles

- Physicians' professional images are important and should be protected. Portrayal of unprofessional behavior may impair a physician's ability to effectively practice medicine, become licensed, and participate in positions of trust and responsibility in the community.
- Internet use must not interfere with the timely completion of educational and clinical duties. Personal blogging or posting of updates should not be done during work hours or with institutional computers.
- All material published on the web should be considered public and permanent.
- The individual is responsible for the content of his/her own blogs/posts, including any legal liability incurred (HIPAA or other).
- Privacy and confidentiality between physician and patient is of the utmost importance. All health care providers have an

obligation to maintain the privacy of patient health information as outlined by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Specifically, residents should:

- Expect no privacy when using institutional computers.
- Use separate personal and professional social networking sites.
- Avoid interacting with current or past patients on personal social networking sites.
- Keep tone and content of all electronic conversations professional. Respect among colleagues and co-workers must occur in a multidisciplinary environment.
- Routinely monitor their own internet presence to ensure that the personal and professional information on their own sites and content posted about them by others is accurate and appropriate.
- Avoid discussing any sensitive, proprietary, confidential, private health information or financial information about the institution (including but not limited to UTHSCSA and the affiliated health systems). Any material posted by a resident that identifies an institution in which the resident is working should have prior written authorization by the appropriate offices of that institution.
- Refrain from posting any material that is obscene, defamatory, profane, libelous, threatening, harassing, abusive, hateful or embarrassing to another person or any other entity.

Patient Information

Identifiable protected health information (PHI) should never be published on the internet. This applies even if no one other than patient is able to identify him/herself from the posted information. Residents must adhere to all HIPAA principles. (Patient images should be only obtained with written consent, and then only on institutional hardware, and never on residents' personal equipment. Electronic transmission of such images must be and/or transmitted only on institutional hardware, via encrypted means, and never on residents' personal equipment.)

Communication Regarding Hospitals or the University

Unauthorized use of institutional (including but not limited to UTHSCSA and the affiliated health systems) information or logos is prohibited. No phone numbers, e-mail addresses, web addresses may be posted to a website without permission from an authorized institutional individual.

Offering Medical Advice

It is never appropriate to provide medical advice on a social networking site.

Disclosure

At times, residents may be asked or may choose to blog or otherwise write online about their experiences as a health professional, or they may post comments on a website as a physician. When doing so, they must reveal any existing conflicts of interest and they should be honest

about their credentials as a physician.

Privacy Settings

Residents should consider setting privacy at the highest level on all social networking sites.

Consequences of Non-Compliance with these Guidelines

Local Consequences

Failure to follow these guiding principles may be considered a breach of professionalism, resulting in any and all consequences deemed appropriate by the individuals program and leadership.

Other Consequences

State medical boards have the authority to discipline physicians for unprofessional behavior relating to the inappropriate use of social networking media, such as:

- Inappropriate communication with patients online
- Use of the internet for unprofessional behavior
- Online misrepresentation of credentials
- Online violations of patient confidentiality
- Failure to reveal conflicts of interest online
- Online derogatory remarks regarding a patient
- Online depiction of intoxication
- Discriminatory language or practices online

State medical boards have the option to discipline physicians for inappropriate or unprofessional conduct while using social media or social networking websites with actions that range from a letter of reprimand to the revocation of a license.

In addition to compliance with this policy, residents should also comply with the [UTHSCSA Social Media Guidelines](#) and the policies/guidelines provided by their training sites:

- [Department of Veterans Affairs Use of Web-Based Collaboration Technologies](#)
- [University Health System Personal Use of Social Media](#)

Because emerging technology and societal trends will continue to change the landscape of social media and social networking, it is envisioned that this policy will require revision at frequent intervals.