

Practice Guideline:

Professional Use of Social Media

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ANBLPN

Association of New Brunswick Licensed
Practical Nurses

AIAANB

L'Association des Infirmier(ère)s Auxiliaires
Autorisé(e)s du Nouveau-Brunswick

Mission

The Association of New Brunswick Licensed Practical Nurses (ANBLPN) is the regulatory authority for Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN) in New Brunswick. ANBLPN's mandate is protection of the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, ethical, and compassionate care. ANBLPN sets, monitors, and enforces practical nurse education, registration, and professional conduct. ANBLPN creates Standards of Practice, establishes a Code of Ethics, and develops and implements a Continuing Competence Program. Additionally, ANBLPN publishes documents to support the practice of LPNs in New Brunswick.

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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technology has been one of the most significant changes that society has ever experienced. For many people, the use of social media has become an everyday occurrence that sees us using communication platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok and more. Nursing professionals may use these sites to communicate with others, however, it is important to understand the legal and personal consequences that may result from inappropriate use of social media.

Statistics show that there has been an increase in the amount of nursing professionals who have been charged with professional misconduct and/or breaches of confidentiality due to their behaviour on-line (Green, 2017). As such, they have been asked to appear before regulatory authorities, and the courts, for issues ranging from inappropriate content, breach of professional boundaries, and breach of client confidentiality/privacy.

Social media remains a constant in our lives and therefore nursing professionals must ensure that they do not blur the lines between personal and professional boundaries. When social media is used inappropriately and unprofessionally it has the potential to harm your clients, yourself, your employer, or your colleagues, and may be seen as unprofessional conduct resulting in disciplinary action by a regulatory authority.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media refers to technology that is being used for the sharing of information and communicating with others to create and maintain relationships. The dramatic rise in the use of social media has begun to replace the traditional face-to-face contact we previously used to communicate with others (Murdoch, Ahlquist, Farthing & Mennie, 2018).

Though the use of social media has continued to grow, education pertaining on how to use social media *professionally* has not. The difference in the usage rates of social media is often due to generational age gaps as today's young adults are considered "digital natives...where new technologies are a normal part of their lives" (Murdoch et al., p.4, 2018). Therefore, it remains imperative that on-line professionalism be taught. Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) must be prepared for their professional role not only during face-to-face client interactions, but with their on-line communication and presence as well.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

When social media is used appropriately, it can be beneficial. On a personal level, it has proven to be a great way to connect with friends and family from near and far. On a professional level, social media can foster professional collaboration, facilitate timely communication with clients and client family members, and serve as a platform to educate the public on health care matters. Additionally, when used appropriately it can also be an effective way for nursing professionals to reflect and seek support from other health care colleagues (NCSBN, 2018).

Social media is a valuable tool; however, it also poses serious risks when not used wisely.

Despite your location in the world, social media can benefit nursing when used appropriately. The following table further outlines the benefits of social media and how it can be used wisely in your practice:

BENEFIT	IN PRACTICE
Timely communication during emergencies	Notification of outbreaks (e.g., COVID-19, Norwalk)
Enhance professional collaborative and mentoring relationships	Connecting with colleagues around the world to seek evidence-based best practice advice
Enhance nursing education	On-line learning, webinars, case-scenarios
Enable research studies	Recruiting participants for clinical research trials (e.g., vaccine research)
Enhance reputation and credibility of nursing	Position statements, Canadian Nurses Association, good news stories
Facilitate support and reflective practice	Collaborating with like-minded individuals on ethical dilemmas/seeking support
Distribution of evidence-informed health information and guidance	Best practice articles, evidence informed facts

RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

When an LPN uses social media inappropriately and unprofessionally, it can result in negative repercussions not only for the LPN but also for their clients and the nursing profession. As regulated professionals, LPNs must be aware that they have a professional and ethical obligation to protect the public and maintain conduct that protects the integrity of the profession (CLPNA, 2021).

RISKS TO CLIENTS

Nursing professionals are held to a much higher standard of confidentiality due to the nature of their work and access to personal health information. LPNs are obligated to safeguard all client information and must refrain from posting any information that may identify a client. Identifiable information is any information that provides enough detail that may lead someone into identifying the client (Green, 2017).

When LPNs use social media in connection with their professional activities, they run the risk of breaching standards of practice related to client confidentiality and maintaining professional boundaries (CNPS, 2021).

Breaching client confidentiality may also lead to violations of the [Personal Health Information Privacy and Access Act](#) (PHIPAA), which could result in criminal charges.

Examples related to Breach of Client Confidentiality:

- *Posting photos of clients*
- *Posting any identifiable client information (name, location, room number, diagnosis, etc.)*
- *Posting about a client's death*
- *Complaining about a client on-line*
- *Posting details about a workplace incident involving a client*

Professional boundaries between clients and nursing professionals must be established and maintained to ensure that the lines between a professional and personal relationship do not become blurred. The obligation to maintain these professional boundaries *always* lies with the LPN and not the client due to the power imbalance that exists within the nurse-client relationship (ANBLPN [a], 2021).

If an LPN engages with a client on a social media platform, they run the risk of crossing professional boundaries, which may damage the therapeutic nurse-client relationship. Maintaining a professional distance from clients helps ensure objectivity and objectivity can be preserved by not engaging with clients on-line nor posting about clients or the workplace on social media (Green, 2017).

Social Media Boundary Violations:

- *Accepting or initiating “friend” or “follower” requests from clients*
- *Commenting on client’s posts*
- *Offering medical advice on-line*
- *Collecting/sharing client photos using your personal device*

RISKS TO THE NURSING PROFESSIONAL

Professional standards indicate that LPNs must maintain their professionalism, including with the use social media. LPNs are responsible for their on-line presence and therefore comments made on social media must be civil and respectful, while avoiding any demeaning, disparaging comments related to clients, colleagues, employers, or organizations (CLPNA, 2021).

Any posts made on social media are generally permanent, even if you have gone back and deleted them. These posts can be saved or downloaded via a “screen shot” without your consent and then distributed widely to audiences that you never anticipated. Once an individual posts on-line, they no longer have any control over what happens to it next which can create a very dangerous situation for the nursing professional (CNPS, 2021).

Nursing professionals should also avoid giving medical advice based on personal opinion within on-line discussion forums from their personal accounts. The public, friends, or family may seek health-related advice from nursing professionals; however, LPNs should not engage in these discussions even if the client has asked. LPNs must only provide evidence-informed information to clients through authorized, employer approved professional platforms (CLPNA, 2021).

To reduce the risk of inappropriate use of social media related to your professional practice, you should consider the following:

- Never post negative comments about clients, colleagues, employers, or organizations;
- Never post confidential information about clients, colleagues, or an organization;
- Always present yourself in a professional manner in photos or videos, even when outside of work;
- Be aware that when you identify as a health care professional on social media you may be perceived as acting within your professional capacity;
- Avoid offering health care advice on-line;
- Be cautious about posting personal views or beliefs on-line; and
- Be aware of any policies related to social media that your employer or regulatory authority may have in place.

RISKS TO THE PROFESSION

Professional standards also indicate that nursing professionals must conduct themselves in a professional manner to preserve the integrity of the profession and uphold public trust (CNPS, 2021). Public trust and confidence in the profession can be damaged by inappropriate and unprofessional posts made by nursing professionals.

NURSING PROFESSIONAL'S RESPONSIBILITIES

Nursing professionals are welcome and free to use social media, however, they must also ensure that they are doing so professionally and appropriately. LPNs are accountable to ensure that their on-line activities do not breach the standards of practice or code of ethics.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENCE

On-line professional presence is a new topic due to the increase in social media usage. LPNs need to keep in mind that information shared through social media could have an impact on themselves and the nursing profession. Images, videos, stories, and rants can go viral. Once you place information on social media, you have minimal control over what happens with that information next, or who gets to see that information (ANBLPN [b], 2020).

LPNs must understand that their on-line behaviour could have negative consequences that can affect their licensure and employment. There is a fine line between privacy and over-sharing and this over-sharing causes issues when people use social media as a personal diary. Any posts that you make on-line can reach thousands of people when your post is liked, commented on, or shared by others (Green, 2017).

Many people hold the belief that if they are in a "private group" they can post whatever they want, and that it should be irrelevant to their employers or regulatory authorities. However, organizations disagree because inappropriate on-line behaviour by registrants or employees can affect the organizations reputation. Additionally, "private" groups are anything but private as anyone within that group can take a screenshot of what you post and share it with whomever they want.

Furthermore, nursing students must also be aware that poor professional presence on-line could lead to potential employers or clients forming judgements that can negatively affect their ability to gain employment in the profession (Murdoch et al., 2018). Nursing students must consider how their on-line behaviour may be reflected on by their college, institutions, or future employment opportunities. Many employers review the social networking profiles/activities of potential employees and may view misconduct or inappropriate behaviour that can damage the LPNs professional integrity (CNPS, 2021) by way of an inappropriate photo, video, comment, or post.

It is imperative that nursing professionals pause before they post and take the time to think through any potential implications that may occur due to their on-line behaviour. Most often people get caught up in the moment before thinking through their actions, after photos or comments have been posted.

Most Common Unprofessional Posts:

- *Negative comments about clients, colleagues, employers, or the profession*
- *Profanity and discriminatory language*
- *Breaches of client confidentiality*
- *Excessive intoxication posts*
- *Sexually suggestive posts*

It is impossible to remove posts, comments, or photos from social media permanently.

Tips to Maintain Professional Presence On-Line

- Use the same level of professionalism with your on-line interactions as you do with your face-to-face interactions;
- Keep your work-related social media separate from your personal social media activities;
- Do not use your nursing credentials for personal gain (i.e., selling or endorsing products);
- Do not post content on behalf of an employer unless authorized to do so;
- Separate personal opinion from nursing opinion;
- Do not post information that may lead others to believe you are not capable of unbiased care;
- Avoid the use of profanity or language that is disparaging, discriminating, or demeaning;
- Maintain a positive, civil, and respectful online presence;
- Never post negative comments about clients, colleagues, employers, or organizations; and
- Keep your private life *private*.

CONFIDENTIALITY & PRIVACY

The biggest area of concern with social media usage is ensuring that client confidentiality and privacy is maintained. LPNs are expected to safeguard any client information that is obtained during the course of client care and only share this information to other members of the health care team who are involved with that client's care. Client information should only be shared with the client's informed consent, when legally required, or when failure to disclose information may lead to significant client harm (NCSBN, 2018). A breach of confidentiality violates the LPN Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice and may lead to disciplinary action.

Therapeutic nurse-client relationships are based on trust and clients expect that their personal information will be safeguarded by nursing professionals. Whether intentional or not, a breach of confidentiality occurs when comments include enough information whereby the client could be identified, referring to clients in a demeaning manner, or posting photos and videos of a client (NCSBN, 2018). Not posting a name or photo does not fully protect you from breaching client confidentiality. LPNs must ensure that anything they post on social media is *client-free*.

Tips to Ensure Client Confidentiality on Social Media

- Never post names, photos, videos, location, or any identifiable information related to a client;
- Report any confidentiality breaches immediately to your employer;
- Understand that posting under an "alias" or "anonymously" does not fully protect you from breaching confidentiality;
- Understand that privacy settings or "private groups" does not ensure privacy; and
- Be aware and comply with employer policies related to social media and confidentiality.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Professional boundaries are the defining lines that separate a therapeutic relationship from a personal relationship. The therapeutic nurse-client relationship is foundational to nursing and professional boundaries separate therapeutic behaviour from non-therapeutic behaviour (ANBLPN [a], 2021).

The dramatic rise in the usage of social media has resulted in the lines between personal and professional boundaries becoming blurred. Nursing professionals must be aware that if they disclose aspects of their workday on social media, they may be breaching their professional standards or client confidentiality (Green, 2017).

It may be a natural feeling for a client to want to connect with their health care provider on social media, however, it is highly inadvisable for LPNs to connect or become “friends” with clients on social media. LPNs need to maintain professional boundaries on social media and be clear with both current and former clients that connecting via these social media platforms is inappropriate (Green, 2017). If an LPN were to accept “friend requests” or engage with clients via other social media means, this would be considered a boundary crossing and damaging to the therapeutic nurse-client relationship.

Tips to Maintain Professional Boundaries

- Do not accept or initiate “friend” or “follower” requests to current or former clients;
- Never respond or engage with client family members who may ask questions about the care or health status of a client;
- Never post or reshare any information that may violate a client’s right to confidentiality;
- Do not collect or share images using your personal device, even if the client has consented; and
- Avoid offering health care advice in response to comments or questions posted on social media.

ACCOUNTABILITY VS. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

LPNs are accountable to ensure that their behaviour on-line does not violate their Standards of Practice or Code of Ethics. These core regulatory documents outline the minimum expectations that all LPNs must adhere to across all practice settings. Additionally, LPNs must understand that any unprofessional or inappropriate use of social media may result in a complaint being submitted to their employer or regulatory authority which may result in disciplinary action.

LPNs are also accountable to follow any employer policies that are in place regarding social media. If no policy is in place, LPNs should collaborate with their employer and advocate for the development of a social media policy (NSCN, 2020).

Nursing professionals must not confuse their professional accountabilities with freedom of expression. Though nursing professionals have the right to express concerns or opinions, they must do so in a manner that does not compromise the public’s trust in the nursing profession (NSCN, 2020).

If there are issues between an LPN and their employer, client or organization, the nursing professional should attempt to resolve these issues with their employer rather than taking to a social media platform where confidentiality cannot be ensured.

There must be a balance between freedom of expression and public trust in the nursing profession. Inappropriate and unprofessional social media use may constitute professional misconduct or conduct unbecoming of the nursing profession (NSCN, 2020).

CYBERBULLYING

The use of social media to bully other nurses, is a new concern for the nursing profession. This is often referred to as “cyberbullying” which is defined as “the use of electronic medium to threaten or harm others, in order to inflict humiliation, fear, and a sense of helplessness” (Green, p. 9, 2017).

Unfortunately, incivility and bullying are not new to nursing, and it is now crossing over into social media. Statistics now show that workplace cyberbullying is as common as other forms of workplace bullying. The rise in cyberbullying can be linked to the ease of anonymity on-line which makes people feel more liberated to express negative emotions and be unaware of the distress that they may be causing to others (Green, 2017).

LPNs must be aware that if they are bullying others using social media, they can face serious legal consequences for these criminal actions and there will be further implications for them as nursing professionals.

EDUCATORS & STUDENTS

On-line professionalism has become an issue for nursing programs and therefore there is a need for educational institutions to provide students with guidance on what professionalism looks like online (Murdoch et al., 2018). Many educational institutions have implemented policies around appropriate use of social media; however, the effects or awareness of such policies is usually lacking. These policies are often related to the institutions concerns over students ensuring client confidentiality while on clinical placements or derogatory statements made about the education institution or profession.

Social media has been positively utilized in nursing programs to increase student understanding of new concepts and to increase student engagement. However, if not used appropriately in the classroom it can begin to blur the lines of professional boundaries. As the concept of initiating or accepting “friend” requests from clients is unacceptable due to professional boundaries, it is also a concern for educators to be “friends” with students on social media as it can send the perception that the educator has ‘favorites’ while increasing the risk of a professional boundary violation between the educator and student (Murdoch et al., 2018).

Most students are not fully aware of their professional standards and therefore it is up to educators to guide and instruct students on the expected behaviours of regulated health professionals. Providing clear explanation and guidance on professional presence on-line is beneficial for students to help shape a positive reputation and securing future employment for themselves.

In a study done by Josefsson (2016), three distinct roles for social media use were identified as; private, student, and professional. The private role is used to communicate with friends and family, the student

role for completing academic work on social media sites, and the professional role was used for career building with potential employers by using sites such as LinkedIn. This concept should be clearly communicated to students to help them understand how to use social media sites appropriately.

Educators should make clear to students that just as they are expected to act professionally in the classroom, during clinicals, and in the lab, so too are they expected to act professionally on-line.

Tips for Nursing Educators:

- Avoid initiating or accepting friend or follower requests from students;
- Advise students never to post negative or derogatory comments about clients, classmates, nursing professionals, the profession, educational institutions, or other organizations;
- Advise students that anything posted on-line can be permanent or shared with others without their knowledge;
- Advise students never to post photos or videos of clients;
- Advise students never to discuss any identifiable information about a client on-line;
- Advise students to never post photos involving illegal activity, excessive intoxication, or sexually suggestive;
- Advise students to avoid the use of profanity or language that is disparaging, discriminating, or demeaning;
- Make students aware of the importance of client confidentiality and professional boundaries as it relates to social media use;
- Advise students that if they witness classmates using social media inappropriately to notify the educational institution;
- Be a role model for students in relation to professional on-line presence; and
- Make students aware that any inappropriate or unprofessional social media use can result in disciplinary action and damage their reputation as a nursing professional.

CONCLUSION

The dramatic rise in the use of social media has created many new challenges for the nursing profession. Nursing professionals must always be mindful of their professional accountabilities in relation to confidentiality, professional boundaries and presenting themselves professionally, which includes their on-line presence. When our private lives and work lives make their way to social media, it increases the risk of breaches in client confidentiality which could lead to professional misconduct allegations.

Understanding these guidelines will help LPNs maintain their professionalism on-line and public trust in the profession.

SUGGESTED READINGS

[The Importance of Professionalism and Presence in Nursing](#)

[Professional Boundaries](#)

RESOURCES

Association of New Brunswick Licensed Practical Nurses [a] (2021). *Practice Guideline: Professional Boundaries*. Retrieved from: <https://www.anblpn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Professional-Boundaries.pdf>

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