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Professionalism Considerations for Online Social Networking Usage			

Preamble:

Personal websites, social networking (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.) and blogs are good things. In today's world, many people avail themselves of these media. Online activity is a medium of self-expression and a communication avenue. It is a way to get feedback on ideas. It fosters learning about diversity and getting different points of view. However, there are downsides of these media which can have lasting professional, legal and ethical implications.

Privacy:

There's no such thing as a "private" social network site. Search engines can turn up posts years after the publication date. Assume what you write on a social networking site is permanent. Comments can be forwarded or copied. Archival systems save information even if you delete a post. A person authorized to post on your "Facebook" can always pass it on to others. Everything that is ever posted can be retraced and accessed, thus even when you think you are deleting something it is never gone for good.

Blurred Purposes:

When using social networks, the lines between public and private, personal and professional are blurred. Problems arise when a person may mix social and academic networking and try to keep the content conservative in order to accommodate both purposes. There is always a high probability that one of your network "friends" may post something that is really only suitable for a select few, but which is viewed as highly inappropriate and/or embarrassing by others.

Misuse:

Around the country, there are numerous examples of discipline related to social networking activities. College students have been expelled or received disciplinary action for comments posted on Facebook and MySpace or similar social networks. Healthcare practitioners have had their employment terminated. People have been turn-down by employers for jobs, internships, or interviews because of information found out about them on their social network. Students have been reprimanded by clinical rotation site supervisors for social networking practices such as becoming electronic "friends" with site co-workers, interns, volunteers or patients.

Legal and Ethical Issues:

One of the most important issues in social networking for health care students and practitioners is purposeful or inadvertent releasing of private information on a patient. Releasing confidential health information is unethical and unlawful (HIPAA - Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and could result in irreparable harm and suffering to the patient as well as fines or imprisonment for the healthcare practitioner. Many hospitals and other health care institutions are now developing or have developed

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certain prohibitions and guidelines on social networking. Releasing student information is unethical and unlawful (FERPA- Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act). Many academic institutions have policies that prohibit defamation and harassment. Student can also run afoul of university misconduct policies which prohibit sharing of examination materials. Professional organizations also have standards of professional conduct and ethical guidelines which students should learn and follow.

Here are some suggestions for you to consider when using a social network:

- **Be thoughtful.** Never write anything you would not say out loud to all parties involved. Be smart! Think and reflect before you post. Also think about reactions before you post. Respect the purpose of the community where you are posting. Be sure that you have all the facts before you post. It is better to verify information with a source first than to have to post a correction or retraction later. Remember that your original post can be copied and forwarded on by other even after you have posted a correction or retraction.
- **Do not return fire.** If a negative post or comment is found online, do not counter with another negative post. If you feel angry or passionate about a subject, it's wise to delay posting until you are calm and clear-headed. Remember, if you are a part of a conversation that is going awry, say something. Do not disregard inappropriate action. Sometimes, "doing nothing" is still ethically considered an act for which you can be held responsible.
- **Be respectful.** To promote respectful discussion, be courteous and productive and **avoid comments that are profane, obscene, defamatory, offensive, harassing, disruptive, sexually explicit, inappropriate, inflammatory or otherwise objectionable.** You are more likely to achieve your goals or sway others to your beliefs if you are constructive and respectful while disagreeing with a concept, policy, or person. Follow proper channels to effect change. It is most constructive to voice concerns, offer suggestions for changes and be active in offering to assist in the change process.
- **Be responsible.** Remember, what you write is ultimately your responsibility. Do not leave your social network site open for others to edit. Log off or lock your computer when not in use.
- **Be aware of the law and ethical conduct.** Read our school's honor code, misconduct policy and other policies related to internet and educational technology usage. Be aware that defamatory statements can be unlawful. Do not post photographs of patients, colleagues or clinical sites without **written** permission.

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Case Examples:

- PT graduate working in local hospital notices patient name on new admission sheet and confirms that it is a former professor from her PT program. She is a frequent user of Facebook and writes message on her “wall - the space on every Facebook user’s profile page on which friends can post messages”. Within minutes she is chatting with several of her former classmates. Later in the evening the professor’s daughter reads about her mother’s hospitalization on the daughter’s favorite social networking site (Dockter, L.L., December 2008-January 2009, Confidentiality Issues: Legal Analysis, *PT Magazine*, 38-41).
- A hospital employee is forced to resign after she tweeted the governor regarding a medical exam he had scheduled after regular hours. The tweet indirectly referenced the governor thus revealing he had received care as a patient at that medical center (Single tweet by hospital employee to Mississippi governor allegedly violates HIPAA, forces her resignation - http://casesblog.blogspot.com/2009/12/single-tweet-by-hospital-employee-to_22.html).
- A pharmacy student uses a cell phone to take photographs of examination questions from a computer screen. The examination questions are passed on via a social network. Since unauthorized release of examination questions occur, the action is considered as misconduct.
- A nursing student is expelled from the University of Louisville for her posts on MySpace where she wrote about patients and other issues (McBride, D., July 2009, *ONS Connect*, 17).
- Personnel at a well known university-based medical center experiential fieldwork site decide to develop a social networking usage policy after an OT student requests that her supervisor and other facility health care providers become “friends” on her Facebook site.
- Medical students and residents post photographs from “alcohol soaked parties and gag photos of cross-dressing” as well as human cadaver parts on their Facebook pages (Laster, J., Feb. 5, 2010, *Now of Facebook: Your Future Doctor, Partying*, 16).
- A student “conspired to and damaged the reputation” of a university employee by posting offending material to Facebook. The student’s commentary violated the university code of conduct’s prohibition against “verbal, written, graphic, or electronic abuse, harassment, coercion, or intimidation of an individual” (Schweitzer, S., Oct. 6, 2005, *Fisher College Expels Student Over Website Entries, Boston Globe*).
- A SPAHP student takes an examination at 9:00 AM. She tweets the following comments and posts them to her Facebook wall. “Wow! Just finished the exam; it was the hardest exam I have ever taken. Better make sure you study chapter 4 really well!” The student is charged with misconduct.

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Postscript:

Faculty and administrators are not monitoring social networking sites; however, when students are adhering to our School's Honor Code and observe violations, they may notify a faculty member or administrator of alleged violations of the School code or policies. It is only when it is brought to our attention that we follow up and investigate further. Feedback is provided to students in order to fulfill our obligation as faculty and administrators to contribute to the learning process and assist students with professional development by helping them understand the visibility of online behaviors, the choices which can be made, and the public nature of the network. In most instances students will receive a warning for inappropriate, but not harmful or dangerous, behavior. In cases of more severe violations or repeated violations, students may also be issued a professionalism citation or charged with misconduct.

Input for development of this document was provided by students, faculty, staff and administrators.

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