

Draft ASHP Statement on Pharmacists' Use of Social Media*

Position

- 1 The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) encourages hospital and health-
2 system pharmacists to use social media in a professional, responsible, and respectful manner to
3 complement and enhance their relationships with patients, caregivers, other members of the
4 health care team, and the public. To achieve that goal, pharmacists should:
- 5 1. Develop skills to effectively utilize social media to facilitate communication with
6 those audiences while adhering to professional standards and legal regulations.
 - 7 2. Adhere to standards of professionalism in both private and public social media
8 communications.
 - 9 3. Recognize the need to exercise professional judgment when participating in a public
10 forum, such as medical information sites, blogs, advocacy pages, or pharmaceutical
11 industry sites.
 - 12 4. Understand their legal and ethical obligations when communicating about patient
13 care in a public forum.

Background

14 Social media can be defined as the sharing of ideas and information in a collaborative fashion
15 through technology. Examples include but are not limited to professional networks such as
16 ASHP Connect, career building networks such as LinkedIn, and purely social sites such as
17 Facebook and Twitter. Informational sites regarding medical information that allow for

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18 commentary from users and medical professionals should also be considered collaborative
19 social media.

20 Social media has transformed the way the people communicate by decreasing the time
21 to report events and reducing barriers to the exchange of information. Health care
22 organizations (e.g., pharmaceutical companies, health systems, patient advocacy groups, and
23 pharmacy benefit companies) have chosen to use social media as means for both
24 communication and marketing. While the motivation for an organization's use of social media
25 may not always be apparent, health care professionals need to be aware of and alert to the use
26 of social media for marketing and sales purposes.

27 Pharmacists have adapted to advancing technology and are using social media to
28 communicate with patients, caregivers, other health care professionals, and the public.
29 Pharmacists need to be cognizant of best practices when using social media, because health
30 care practitioners, including pharmacy professionals, are often held to a higher standard of
31 professionalism within and outside the workplace than members of the public.¹ Although social
32 media have proven to be an effective means of communication, their use has also created
33 issues regarding professionalism and patient privacy.

Professionalism

34 In the *ASHP Statement on Professionalism*,² ASHP "urges practicing pharmacists to serve as
35 mentors to students, residents, and colleagues in a manner that fosters the adoption of high
36 professional aspirations for pharmacy practice, high personal standards of integrity and
37 competence, a commitment to serve humanity, habits of analytical thinking and ethical

38 reasoning, and a commitment to lifelong learning.” With regard to social media, pharmacy
39 professionals (including pharmacy students, as pharmacy professionals in training) should
40 aspire to the following:

- 41 1. Pharmacy professionals should use strict privacy settings to protect personal
42 information to the greatest extent possible, keeping in mind that privacy settings are
43 not perfect and that information posted online is likely permanent. Continuous self-
44 monitoring is necessary to evaluate privacy settings as social media sites change
45 policies and settings.³
- 46 2. Pharmacists who serve as preceptors and mentors should exercise caution in their
47 use of social media to set positive examples for pharmacy students and residents.⁴
- 48 3. Pharmacy professionals should carefully distinguish between personal and
49 professional information within social media and make conscientious decisions
50 regarding who should have access to personal information. These professionals
51 should recognize the difficult nature of these decisions, as it may be difficult to
52 differentiate between individuals who may fall into either category.³
- 53 4. When one pharmacy professional becomes aware of unprofessional content posted
54 to a social media site by another, he or she should bring the questionable content to
55 that individual’s attention. If that individual chooses not to remove highly
56 inappropriate information, the pharmacy professional should report the matter to
57 appropriate authorities.³
- 58 5. Pharmacy professionals, especially pharmacy students, must be conscious that
59 content posted to social media sites may have consequences on reputations or
60 careers for years to come and may reflect poorly upon the pharmacy profession.
61 Accessible postings on social media should be subject to the same professional
62 standards as any other personal interaction.
- 63 6. Pharmacy professionals should be mindful when participating in professional or
64 personal blogs. Regardless of the intended audience, publication of the written
65 information makes it accessible to others. Pharmacy professionals should avoid

66 using blogs as a means to complain about patients, co-workers, or careers. While
67 there is room online for healthy debate about health care and pharmacy practice,
68 such debate should not reflect poorly upon the pharmacy profession.

Patient Privacy

69 The *ASHP Statement on Confidentiality of Patient Health Care Information*⁵ state ASHP's strong
70 beliefs that "pharmacists must have access to patient health records in order to provide quality
71 care and ensure the safe use of medications" and that "[w]ithin health systems, all authorized
72 practitioners should be encouraged to communicate freely with each other while maintaining
73 patient confidentiality and privacy."

74 Use of social media has the following implications for patient privacy:

- 75 1. Pharmacists should continue to follow the mandates of patient privacy and
76 confidentiality laws in all environments, including online, and refrain from posting
77 any patient information on social media.⁶
- 78 2. Pharmacy professionals should avoid posting information about a specific patient
79 case on social media, even if all identifying information is excluded.
- 80 3. Pharmacy professionals should be hesitant to interact with patients online,
81 especially via social media. If such interaction is necessary, all online relationships
82 should conform to the ethical boundaries of an appropriate patient-pharmacist
83 relationship.⁶
- 84 4. Pharmacists should understand the implications of providing medical advice within a
85 public forum and accept the liabilities associated with such actions, from the
86 standpoint of both practice and privacy.

Conclusion

87 Social media are emerging as important modes of communication and are increasingly be used
88 for personal, professional, and business communication, as well as for patient care. As medical
89 professionals held to high standards of personal and professional conduct, pharmacists have a
90 responsibility to use social media appropriately.

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