

SOCIAL NETWORKING AND NURSES



Objective

The purpose of this article is to provide information about social networking as related to nursing practice, and enhance the nurse's knowledge and application of social networking

Highlights The use of social networking can have numerous benefits but also unintended consequences for an individual nurse's career. Remember that standards of professionalism are the same online as in any other circumstance.

The use of social media, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, blogs, chat rooms, MySpace and other similar sites are increasing exponentially. A 2010 Pew report stated that among adults, 73% use Facebook, and 14% use LinkedIn (Pew Report, 2010). The use of social media will continue to rise and is a common daily occurrence for most of us.

Nurses have an added responsibility of ethical use related to personal use of social networking. Once again this year, nurses were ranked highest on honesty and ethical standards according to the Gallup poll, as being the most trusted profession in the United States (Jones, 2011). Nurses have held the number one spot every year since 1999, with the exception of 2001 when firefighters topped the list following the September 11 attacks. As nurses, it is important to uphold the public's trust and respect in

all areas of our lives, including the use of social networking. Therefore, as the most trusted healthcare professionals, nurses should not only understand the use of these technologies, but nurses should also consider when or where to use these technologies.

Benefits of Social Networking

It is wonderful to live in an age of social networking and see the benefits provided to nurses. As nurses, we educate our patients and can provide appropriate websites for patient and family education. Many nurses use it as a means of professional networking and communication with colleagues. Networking can also disseminate research and evidence-based practice findings to colleagues. Smart phones and tablets have entered the health care arena and allow easy access of vital information that can ensure effective care of the patient. The benefits of social networking are numerous, and will increase in the future.

Concerns of Social Networking

With the increase in technology, also come some concerns for the profession. Inappropriate sharing of personal or work information that reflects poorly on the nurse and professionalism in nursing is a concern for all of us. Many times breaches of patient confidentiality can occur, either intentionally or inadvertently. Examples include description of a patient with enough detail for identification, posting videos or pictures of patients, and referring to the patient in a demeaning manner (ANA, 2011). This can lead to a breach of patient confidentiality and privacy and damage to a nurse's career.

Also of concern is the ability of the nurse to become distracted while using smart phones. Such distractions have the potential to be catastrophic. There are appropriate uses of technology at

work during patient care...and checking one's Facebook status is not one of them!

Students have been expelled from nursing school for posting online photos of themselves with a placenta and nurses have been fired for discussing patient cases on Facebook. In the Brynes vs. Johnson County Community College litigation, a nursing student posted a photo of herself with a placenta on her personal Facebook page. The photo went viral within hours; the student was expelled one day later and was told that she could re-apply to enter the program the following year. The patient issue was that in the photo you could see the student's ID badge and the school's patch on her uniform. By right-clicking on the photo the embedded date of the photo is retrievable. Since few babies were delivered in that hospital that day, it was easy to "track" and connect the placenta to the patient. "The Privacy Rule protects all individually identifiable health information held or transmitted by a covered entity or its business associate, in any form or media, whether electronic, paper or oral" (Hader, 2010).

Principles for Social Networking

The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) and the American Nurses Association (ANA) have mutually endorsed each organization's guidelines for upholding professional boundaries in a social networking environment and have created a joint webinar on Guidelines for Social Media (ANA and NCSBN, 2011). The NCSBN White paper: A nurse's guide to the use of social media lists actions nurses can take to minimize risk and provides scenarios of unprofessional behavior based on actual events reported to Boards of Nursing (NCSBN, 2011).

The ANA publication, Principles for Social Networking and the Nurse:

Guidance for the Registered Nurse, is based on the ANA foundational documents on ethics and standards of practice (ANA, 2011). A Social Networking Principles Toolkit consisting of a fact sheet, tip-card, and poster is available at no cost on the ANA website: <http://nursingworld.org/socialnetworkingtoolkit>

The American Nurses' Association (ANA) has developed a guideline for use of social media by nurses that includes principles for social networking that can lead to appropriate use of the technology (ANA, 2011). Simply removing a name or face does not necessarily protect the patient's identification. The principles are:

- Nurses must not transmit or place online individually identifiable patient information.
- Nurses must observe ethically prescribed professional patient-nurse boundaries.
- Nurses should understand that patients, colleagues, institutions, and employers may view postings.
- Nurses should take advantage of privacy settings and seek to separate personal and professional information online.

Nurses should bring content that could harm a patient's privacy, rights, or welfare to the attention of appropriate authorities. Nurses should participate in developing institutional policies governing online conduct.

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protection includes information that can reasonably be used to identify the patient.

HIPAA's Dos and Don'ts of Social Networking:

- Do make a distinction between your personal life and professional life online.
- Do use social media for educational and professional purposes.

- Do be mindful of HIPAA.
- Do set your privacy settings as high as possible.
- Don't be lulled by false security.
- Don't discuss your patients or your colleagues.

The Code of Ethics for Nurses provides a framework for nurses in ethical decision-making and can provide guidance in the use of social media (ANA, 2001). The Code of Ethics for Nurses reminds us of our primary commitment to patients, to practice with compassion and respect for all individuals, and the requirement to disseminate knowledge (ANA, 2001).

According to the ANA:

The patient's well-being could be jeopardized and the fundamental trust between patient and nurse be destroyed by unnecessary access to data or by the inappropriate disclosure of identifiable patient information. The rights, well-being, and safety of the individual patient should be the primary factors in arriving at any professional judgment concerning the disposition of confidential information received from or about the patient, whether oral, written, or electronic.

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Consequences for Inappropriate Use of Social Networking

There are consequences to inappropriate use of social media. The potential consequences vary according to the specific breach of trust. The incident may be reportable to the North Carolina Board of Nursing (NCBON). The NCBON may investigate the nurse after a report of inappropriate use of social media on the grounds of (NCSBN, 2011):

- Unprofessional conduct
- Unethical conduct
- Moral turpitude (a evil quality of behaving)
- Management of patient records
- Revealing a privileged communication: and;
- Breach of confidentiality

If the NCBON finds the allegations to be true, the nurse can face disciplinary action ranging from a reprimand or sanctions to temporary loss of license. Thirty-three state BONs reported complaints last year against nurses who violated patient privacy using social media (NCSBN, 2011). In many cases, the nurse inadvertently breached confidentiality.

There may be other consequences also. The nurse may face complaints that a state or federal law to protect patient confidentiality was breached. This violation can result in civil or criminal charges. There is also the possibility the nurse could face a lawsuit for personal damages including defamation or invasion of privacy. If employment rules were broken, the nurse may face suspension or termination at work.

The line between speech protected by labor laws and the First Amendment and the ability of an employer to impose expectations on employees outside of work is still being determined (National Labor Relations Board, 2011). Nonetheless, inappropriate comments can be detrimental to a cohesive health care delivery team and may result in sanctions against the nurse (Cronquist and Spector, 2011).

Policies

Organizations are finding the need to develop policies and professional guidelines to aid nurses in negotiating responsibly and professionally the use of social networking. This is beginning to happen in some medical institutions but needs more widespread attention in order to avoid legal and ethical problems.

Managers need to be aware that, although sending a friend request to an employee might seem rather fun and friendly, it could have unintended consequences. Even if the manager is comfortable initiating the request, the employee may not feel the same way, creating a potentially negative undertone to their working relationship. It may lead to potential claims of fraternization, harassment, or stalking.

Inappropriate social networking should also be included in nursing education program curriculums. Discussions of professional conduct and ethical behavior in the health care workplace and clinical settings are necessary. The importance of social networking must be a priority with new students during orientation, and the potential pitfalls social media may create for nurses.

Most health care employers expect that the employee will follow the same behaviors online as they would in face-to-face contact. Be sure to know the policies of your employer or academic institution. Many institutions now have policies such as:

- Do not “friend” patients
- Do not accept “friend requests” from patients or their family members
- Never share any patient information via Facebook or other social media
- Never post pictures of patients or pose with patients for pictures.
- Never give medical advice via social media.

Summary

Our online conversation should reflect the same professionalism that is expected when working with the public. If you are about to post an item that you know would be embarrassing if seen

by a colleague, employer, patient, or family member, then do not post it. It is essential to maintain professional integrity when incorporating networking, even when doing so only in your personal life.

Remember once you post something, there is a digital footprint forever. Just because you delete a post, photo or video, does not mean it is destroyed. Data can be retrievable from law enforcement or technology experts.

The golden rule in social networking is this: assume that there is no privacy. Pretend that what you are writing is appearing on a permanent billboard. If you would not want it to be printed for all to see, then think twice before posting to a social media site.

Examples of Inappropriate Posts from Ethical Reasoning and Online Social Media:

My patient was the cutest little 70-year-old lady. And I found out she lives in my neighborhood. Awesome...a new friend.

So far, my clinical sucks...when will I start doing the fun stuff?

First day off orientation, and I feel completely overwhelmed! I seriously don't know what I'm doing yet. I feel sorry if you were my patient today...but I will get better.

The new staffing policy here is awful... who thought it was OK to have each nurse have 6 patients. Looks like our NAs will have to do a lot more!

Friday afternoon....so glad the weekend is here. Time to get drunk. I need a vacation from responsibility.

What's up everyone? I'm on a break at clinical and had some time to post. Anybody out there have a minute to catch up?

I'm going to make sure that I have a living will. I just don't understand why



the patient I cared for today wants “everything done” to hang on.

My supervisor was bugging me today to join ANA. Why would I need to do that?

(Englund et al., 2012)

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CAUTION: YOUTUBE AND COMPETENCY

Some YouTube videos may be an excellent educational resource when a licensed nurse is learning a new procedure. Since there is a plethora of videos on YouTube you should use caution when selecting educational videos. As you look to see the expertise of an author when reading a professional document or article, so too you should do the same with YouTube. Always assure the video content was provided or approved by a reputable nursing/medical authority.

As well, watching a YouTube video does not satisfy the requirements of nursing competency. Watching a video can be part of a learning plan, but should never be an RN’s only resource. The nurse should also review nursing literature for knowledge in pathophysiology and expected and adverse outcomes. In addition, the nurse should always be observed completing an activity by a competent RN or other authorized licensed healthcare provider to assure competency.

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INSTRUCTIONS

Read the article and on-line reference documents (if applicable). There is not a test requirement, although reading for comprehension and self-assessment of knowledge is encouraged.

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Registration deadline is October 1, 2015.

PROVIDER ACCREDITATION

The North Carolina Board of Nursing will award **1.0 contact hours** for this continuing nursing education activity.

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