NMC guidance advises nurses on the use of social networking

**Social networking: avoiding the pitfalls**

These days most people have an account with at least one social networking site. Most organisations, including nursing bodies, use them as a means of engaging and informing professionals. Use of these sites does not come without pitfalls, however, and the Nursing and Midwifery Council has issued guidance for nurses, midwives and students who use websites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (see tinyurl.com/NMC-social).

The regulator has warned nurses they could be struck off the nursing register if their usage is deemed inappropriate. It has said in a few cases that nurses have used such sites to pursue inappropriate relationships with service users, or posted photographs that breached patient confidentiality.

The NMC issued its guidance in response to “a number” of nurses being investigated over their social networking activity. It recommends that registrants make sure they use privacy settings when using social networking sites, and do not post anything they would not want their employees, some colleagues, patients or service users to see.

**Applying the code**

The NMC’s guidance sets out how The Code: Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics for Nurses and Midwives (NMC, 2008) can be applied in thinking about social networking sites, and provides advice for using them responsibly. It addresses issues that are specific to social networking sites but its principles can be applied to all types of online communication, such as personal websites and blogs, discussion boards, email groups and instant messaging. The guidance covers content shared online, including text, photographs, other images, videos and audio files.

The Code states nurses and midwives must “uphold the reputation of your profession at all times” (NMC, 2008), while students must “uphold the reputation of your chosen profession at all times” (NMC, 2009). In terms of the guidance, this means conduct online and in the real world should be judged in the same way, and be of a similarly high standard.

The NMC warns that nurses and midwives will put their registration at risk, and students may jeopardise their ability to join its register, if they:

- Share confidential information online;
- Post inappropriate comments about colleagues or patients;
- Use social networking sites to bully or intimidate colleagues;
- Pursue personal relationships with patients or service users;
- Distribute sexually explicit material;
- Use social networking sites in any way that is unlawful.

The list is not exhaustive so, if there is any doubt over whether an online activity is acceptable, nurses should think how it would be perceived in the real world. For example, manipulated photos intended to mock individuals would be considered offensive if printed and pinned on workplace noticeboards, and are no less offensive when shared online – even if shared privately between friends.

**Taking precautions**

The NMC offers the following advice to nurses using social networking sites:

- Keep your personal and professional life separate as far as possible – for example keep Facebook for close friends and family and use LinkedIn for building professional relationships;
- If you identify yourself as a nurse or midwife on Facebook, or similar sites, you should act responsibly at all times and uphold the reputation of your profession;
- Protect your own privacy – think thoroughly about what kinds of information you want to share and with whom, and adjust your privacy settings accordingly;
- Do not use social networks to build or pursue relationships with patients and service users, even if they are no longer in your care;
- Do not discuss work-related issues online, including conversations about patients or complaints about colleagues, even when anonymised;
- Never post pictures of patients or service users, even if they ask you to do this;
- Social networking sites should not be used for raising and escalating concerns;
- Remember that everything you post online is public, even with the strictest privacy settings;
- You can take action if you find yourself the target of complaints or abuse on social networking sites – you can remove someone from your friend list and block them from interacting with you, and most sites include mechanisms to report abusive activity and support users who are subject to abuse from others;
- If you are concerned about another health professional or student’s behaviour online, you should raise your concerns, even with their university or employer if necessary. In the most serious circumstances, for example if someone’s use of a social networking site is unlawful, you should also report the incident to the police.

The guidance stresses that social networking sites are relatively new, so norms of conduct and behaviour are still evolving. The NMC will regularly review its advice and welcomes feedback on its use in practice.

**NMC guidance in brief**

Social networking sites are not an exception from the Code: Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics for Nurses and Midwives. London: NMC. tinyurl.com/nmc-code

**References**
