



TIPS ON THE DOS AND DON'TS

Text by Dr Tan Yia Swam



This article presents my personal tips on handling the “new” era of social media. I’m not saying that it’s the best, but I have not gotten into any trouble – yet!

For the official word on professionalism and advertising, please refer to the Singapore Medical Council’s (SMC) Ethical Code and Ethical Guidelines 2016 (ECEG), as well as the accompanying Handbook on Medical Ethics. Also relevant are the Private Hospitals and Medical Clinics (PHMC) (Advertisement) Regulations 2019, although the regulations to be made under the upcoming Healthcare Services Act will in due course supersede the current regulations, after it is enacted and comes into force.

Knowing your social media platforms

There are many social media platforms in the market: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, Tumblr, Flickr, Reddit, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Quora and WeChat, not to mention all the different blogs, online forums and communities!

I discuss my approach to social media in these three broad categories:

1. What do I want to use it for?
2. How may I use it in a professional way?
3. How may I protect myself?

What do I want to use it for?

Growing up, I used various platforms, depending on whatever the “in” thing was then. In fact, one might guess a person’s age just by looking at the platforms he/she uses. Do you remember ICQ? Or Friendster? How about online games like Neopets and MapleStory?

For some, I either stopped using them or they died a natural death; others, I maintained because I actually found them relevant and useful, like WhatsApp for daily communications with friends IRL (in real life) and Facebook to keep in touch with overseas friends. Other platforms like YouTube are great for free music videos and surgical videos, and Pinterest for contents and images on art, comics, online shopping and food.

So, ask yourself, what do you use social media for? Is it for purely personal uses? To have an online presence as an influencer? To build a brand? Is it for business or leisure?

Next, decide which platform suits you. Will you be writing articles, or do you believe that a picture speaks a thousand

words? Do you have the time or budget to maintain that social media presence and engagement? Keep in mind that healthcare is not quite like selling jewellery online; nobody dies from not getting a flower pendant immediately, but if you were to miss a question on an urgent medical condition – who is to be held responsible?

How may I use it in a professional way?

It was only in recent years that I started to think about reaching out to the public. I had been reposting articles on my personal social media accounts, and sharing occasional thoughts about healthcare. Subsequently, wanting a larger audience while still maintaining some form of privacy, I started a blog. As I ventured into private practice, I felt the need to have some form of social media marketing. However, I also felt strongly that healthcare cannot translate directly to business, and there must not be any kind of incentivised ads on any of my social media accounts. The ECEG and PHMC (Advertisement) Regulations 2019 are very clear on this.

Yet these lines can be blurred when patients approach you on social media. And how about good friends who have



directed their relatives to you? ECEG Sections C12.5 to 7 cover the nature of relationships with patients and social media. I have also highlighted below some relevant segments of the ECEG and Medical Registration Act (MRA).

ECEG Section C10: Visual or audio recordings of patients

If I have a recorded segment of a surgery, can I show it on my social media? Keep in mind that if the patient is identifiable, explicit consent must be obtained.

ECEG Section D3: Comments about colleagues

What if a reader posts a question about their own doctor? What would be the appropriate and professional way to reply? Keep in mind that one has not assessed this patient's condition and has no way to verify if the reader is who he/she claims to be, or whether the facts of the case are as stated.

ECEG Section G: Advertising

Please study this section inside out as you embark on social media marketing. Some key points in brief: nothing self-laudatory ("Singapore's No. 1 Breast Surgeon!"); nothing that is sensationalised ("She would have died, but I stepped in and saved her life"); and nothing that has financial inducement ("Come in for a visit now and get a set of beauty collagen masks from Korea for free! While stocks last!").

MRA Section 39(1)(a)

Where a doctor can be the subject of a complaint to the SMC for "the conduct of a registered medical practitioner in his professional capacity or on his improper act or conduct which brings disrepute to his profession".

The nature of the medium used may unfortunately accentuate the impact of an act, thereby bringing "disrepute to the profession". Take this scenario for example: I attend a wine tasting event and have sips of four types of

wine. I exercise responsibility and take a hired car home, but I flush red easily. That one photo published by the event organiser may then draw comments ("Wow, how much did you all drink?"), and speculations ("I wonder if she could drive after that?"; "Oh my God, she operated on me the next day!"; "Wah lau, these doctors all drink a lot!")

It may not matter that my alcohol level was already back to normal – the magnifying effect of social media draws negative comments, and this brings disrepute to the profession.

How may I protect myself?

Singapore is very small, and our various communities overlap frequently. How many times have you found out in the midst of consultation that the patient and you went to the same school, or grew up in the same neighbourhood, or have a common friend? An even more awkward situation may be that their spouse was your ex!

Online, these connections get amplified. With the power of Google, any information you share online never goes away. If a person searches hard enough, there will be something that you might have forgotten about (or wished to be forgotten!). Another fictional example: a video of you drunk and dancing half-naked, or making some undying declaration of love to your junior college crush – who is now married to your head of department.

I share here some reminders on how we can protect ourselves online:

1. Behave as well as you can in real life (Thank goodness social media wasn't popular in my teens!);
2. Behave well online;
3. Maintain a private space (some do not have a personal online presence, just pure business);
4. Learn to set boundaries: Check the privacy settings of various platforms, keep track of regular updates and cleaning up of data;

5. Have a bunch of real life friends who are also your online friends – they help to look out for accounts impersonating you and alert you early, so that you can report to the relevant platform and post a warning on your main account.

Sharing tips and tricks for everyone

I hope my simple guide will be helpful for colleagues on social media. Younger readers (who are probably way more internet savvy): if you have any additional tips to share, do send them in to news@sma.org.sg. Now, I better go check on my privacy settings!

Stay safe, and have fun! ♦

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Mr Lek Siang Pheng, deputy managing partner for Dentons Rodyk and SMA Honorary Legal Advisor, for his input in this article.

Further readings

1. Singapore Medical Council. SMC ethical code and ethical guidelines (2002 and 2016 editions) and handbook on medical ethics (2016 edition). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3po1ST3>.
2. Private Hospitals and Medical Clinics Act (Cap 248). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3qzwz9wz>.
3. Healthcare Services Bill (Bill 37 of 2019). Available at: <https://bit.ly/3qsfAFz>.

Dr Tan is a mother to three kids, wife to a surgeon, a daughter and a daughter-in-law. She trained as a general surgeon, and entered private practice in mid-2019, focusing on breast surgery. She treasures her friends and wishes to have more time for her diverse interests: cooking, eating, music, drawing, writing, photography and comedy.

