



## **SOCIAL NETWORKING GUIDELINES**

### Guidelines for the Use of Online Social Networking Sites

#### **I. Introduction**

The Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine (MSUCOM) recognizes that online social networking has become an increasingly important means of facilitating communication. While social networking has provided unique opportunities to interact, it has also created a forum for potential issues for future osteopathic physicians. As professionals bound by social contracts and professional obligations, medical students must be cognizant of the public nature of social networking forums and the permanent nature of postings therein. Even though these sites offer terrific potential to bolster communication with friends and colleagues, they are also a forum for lapses of professionalism and professional behavior that may be freely visible by many people, despite the impression of privacy these sites portray. As a result, MSUCOM has drafted the following guidelines to aid students in the safe and responsible navigation of these sites.

#### **II. Scope**

The following document outlines “best practice guidelines” for medical professionals-in-training at MSUCOM during their medical school training. They apply to all students who participate in social networking sites and online weblogs. Students should follow these guidelines whether participating in social networks personally or professionally, or whether they are using personal technology or technological resources owned or operated by Michigan State University or MSUCOM.

#### **III. Online Social Networking: A Brief Definition**

A social networking site is a space on the internet where users can create a profile and connect that profile to others (whether it be individuals or entities) to establish a personal or professional network. Examples include, but are not limited to, “Facebook,” “MySpace,” “LinkedIn,” and “Twitter.”

A weblog is a website, usually in the form of an online journal, maintained by an individual or group, with regular commentary on any number of subjects which may incorporate text, audio, video clips, and any other types of media.

#### **IV. Potential Consequences of Online Unprofessional Behavior**

The permanence and written nature of online postings cause them to be subject to higher levels of scrutiny than many other forms of communication. Therefore, the postings within social networking sites are subject to the same standards of professionalism as any other personal or professional interaction, and will be treated as if made in a public forum.

The use of social networking sites or weblogs can also have legal ramifications. Comments made regarding the care of patients, or that portray you or a colleague in an unprofessional manner, may be used in court as evidence of a variety of claims (including libel, slander, defamation of character, negligence, and others) or in other disciplinary proceedings (e.g. State Medical Licensing Boards). Libel, slander, and other forms of defamation refer, generally, to the communication (written, oral, tangible, etc.) of a false statement about a person that injures his/her reputation. Other potential consequences include the revocation of a residency selection, or sanctions by a professional licensing board.

Also, the statements and photos posted within these sites are potentially viewable by program directors or future employers. It is not uncommon for program directors to search for the social networking profiles of potential residents and to use the discovered information in making selection decisions.

Individuals have been denied residencies and other employment opportunities as a result of what is found on social networking sites.

With respect to confidentiality, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) applies to social networking sites, and violators may be subject to the same prosecution as with other HIPAA violations.

In addition, cyber stalking and other inappropriate postings can be considered forms of sexual harassment. Relationships online with other medical students are governed by MSU sexual harassment policies. Please refer to the professionalism guidelines adhered to by MSUCOM which can be found on the MSUCOM website and the Medical Student Rights and Responsibilities document for more information regarding these issues.

#### **V. Best Practice Guidelines for Online Social Networking**

1. The lines between public and private as well as personal and professional are often blurred in online social networks. By identifying yourself as an MSUCOM student, you may influence perceptions about MSUCOM by those who have access to your social network profile or weblog. All content associated with you should be consistent with your position at the school and with MSUCOM's values and professional standards.
2. Unprofessional postings by others on your page may reflect very poorly on you. Please monitor others' postings on your profile and strive to ensure that the content would not be viewed as unprofessional. It may be useful to block postings from individuals who post unprofessional content.

3. Help monitor your peers by alerting colleagues to unprofessional or potentially offensive comments made online to avoid future indiscretions and refer them to this document.
4. Always avoid giving medical advice as this could result in a violation of HIPAA and may cause danger to others. Make sure that you differentiate medical opinions from medical facts and articulate what statements reflect your personal beliefs.
5. Due to continuous changes in these sites you should closely monitor the privacy settings of your social network accounts to optimize their privacy and security. Restrict your settings so that only individuals you have authorized to access your profile can see your information. Also, you should not share or post any identification numbers or demographic information online.
6. Others may post photos of you, and may “tag” you in each of the photos. It is your responsibility to make sure that these photos are appropriate and are not professionally compromising. As a general rule it is wise to “untag” yourself from any photos, and to refrain from tagging others unless you have explicit permission from them to do so. Privacy or account settings may allow you to prevent photos from being “tagged” with your information, or may prevent others from seeing your tags.
7. Online discussions of specific patients should be strictly avoided, even if all identifying information is excluded. It is possible that someone could recognize the patient to which you are referring based upon the context.
8. Under no circumstances should photos of patients/cadavers or photos depicting the body parts of patients/cadavers be displayed online. Remember, even if you have permission, such photos may be downloadable and forwarded by others. Once you post, the actions of others could lead to legal or professional consequences for you personally.
9. Do not have interactions with patients on social networking sites. This provides an opportunity for a dual relationship, which may damage the doctor-patient relationship and may have legal consequences.
10. Do not infringe upon another’s copyrighted or trademarked materials. If you post content, photos, or other media, you are acknowledging that you own or have the right to use these items.
11. Refrain from accessing social networking sites while in class, at work, or in clinical-work areas.