



Social media principles and code of conduct

For fellows and members of the RCP and those in elected or voluntary roles

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP) has a high profile on social media, which provides a powerful way for it to share its work and amplify messages. The RCP encourages members and fellows to share posts from the RCP's X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram accounts with their own networks.

Using social media carries risks and responsibilities for the individual and for the RCP. It provides a very large and instantly accessible public arena, which, while transitory in its nature, offers little practical opportunity to retract statements once they are in the public domain. Social media has unfortunately encouraged many people in different walks of life to say something in the moment that they have later had cause to regret, or to behave in a way at odds with their usual personal or professional standards.

These principles of conduct for RCP fellows, members and those in elected or voluntary roles, are intended as a helpful addition to other guidance, for example that provided by the [General Medical Council](#) and other professional bodies, and by NHS trusts and other employers.

The purpose of this guidance is to help protect the reputation of the RCP and to help individuals avoid potentially serious consequences, which may arise from using social media inappropriately.

The RCP

A social media post may threaten or damage the reputation of the RCP if it is tagged or cited directly but also if the person posting is associated with the RCP, perhaps because they hold or have previously held a paid or unpaid role with the organisation. Even with a disclaimer saying it represents a personal view, a social media post may be seen as being endorsed by the RCP or as evidence of a disagreement within the organisation.

Individuals

Social media posts can have a negative impact on individuals, including when they are subjected to unwarranted attention, criticism of their work or personalised attacks. This impact will be greater if many others are also targeting an individual. Colleagues must be treated fairly and with respect. Patient confidentiality must be maintained and their trust in the medical profession not undermined.

RCP guidance

- 1 Protect your reputation, professionalism and privacy – consider carefully the content you post/share but also who you engage with and the style in which you do so.
- 2 Be transparent and honest – declare any vested interests. You may have been really impressed with a product or service or be acting as a brand ambassador or business adviser, but please don't tag the RCP into your post as this might imply that the RCP is providing an endorsement, which it cannot do. Be clear that you are expressing personal views, which are not necessarily those of the RCP – but bear in mind that the RCP may nevertheless find itself associated with those views, especially if tagged by you. You should consider the potential impact of your personal views on the RCP.
- 3 Consider confidentiality – never post any information that could be confidential or proprietary. You may have been party to information shared by the RCP for organisational purposes but please do not share this without permission.
- 4 Do not use patient identifiable data – consider whether information posted by you, when added to other information already in the public domain, may lead to identification of a patient or patients.
- 5 Be respectful of others and do not post information that could be seen as offensive or defamatory or which breaches copyright. The same laws apply on social media as elsewhere.
- 6 Consider the potential impact of your social media output on colleagues and the wider profession, and keep in mind that posts may also be seen by patients.
- 7 Consider the impact of your post on individuals reading it – in particular, consider the impact it might have on their mental health.
- 8 When thinking about the language you use, consider whether it may be at odds with the RCP's commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion (see below).
- 9 Take care to ensure that the opinions you are expressing, sharing or supporting are based on facts and consider whether evidence is being quoted selectively, out of context or inaccurately.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

In 2021, the RCP published a [diversity in communications policy](#) for staff and others involved in presenting the RCP and its work to the organisation's various audiences, as part of its equality and diversity review. Relevant points in the policy include:

- > Social media is about amplifying conversations and engaging users, but we need to take care which conversations we do (and don't) amplify and with which users we choose to engage.
- > We should continue to give full consideration before endorsing others' campaigns or statements on social media, and generally confine ourselves to areas in which we have knowledge or expertise. We cannot, and should not try to, comment on everything, however worthwhile.
- > We should be cautious about criticising others' actions or statements, especially where we may not have all the facts or where we risk becoming part of a social media 'pile-on' targeting an individual.

- > Social media requires informal language and brevity and is often fast moving but this must not be an excuse for using offensive terms or sharing posts by others doing so. We should be mindful that where humour is used it may be funny to one person but offensive to another.
- > Care must be taken over terminology used, for example when referring to minority groups, especially as what is acceptable may change over time, and we should avoid appropriating elements of marginalised culture (social media users are sometimes criticised for using images, ideas, practices or the like without understanding or acknowledging where they have come from or the struggles involved in their creation).
- > Care should be taken to use professional titles or suffixes consistently and equitably, so that male and female doctors are described in the same way and gender or other biases cannot be inferred.
- > Care should be taken over the use of images and animations and imagery used, where possible, to improve visibility of under-represented groups. Our policy is generally not to use ready-made GIFs, with very rare exceptions, as these often perpetuate stereotypes.
- > If our own officers, staff or members post inappropriate content on social media we will act swiftly to disown or condemn this and take whatever action is necessary to minimise the impact on those affected, to protect the reputation of the RCP and to avoid a repetition.

RCP elections and Candidate Code of Practice

As these principles and code of conduct apply to all RCP fellows and members, they apply to those standing for election to an RCP office. In the case of elections, they are supplemented by the Candidate Code of Practice.

RCP social media policy summary

The RCP encourages engagement through social media. While not wishing to curtail freedom of expression or debate, it expects its members, fellows and staff to respect the spirit of the guidance and that of other professional bodies, in order to protect both individuals and the college from reputational or other harm.

Advice and support are available from media@rcp.ac.uk

X (formerly Twitter): @RCPhysicians
 Facebook: @RoyalCollegeofPhysicians
 LinkedIn: Royal College of Physicians
 Instagram: @rcphysicians

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