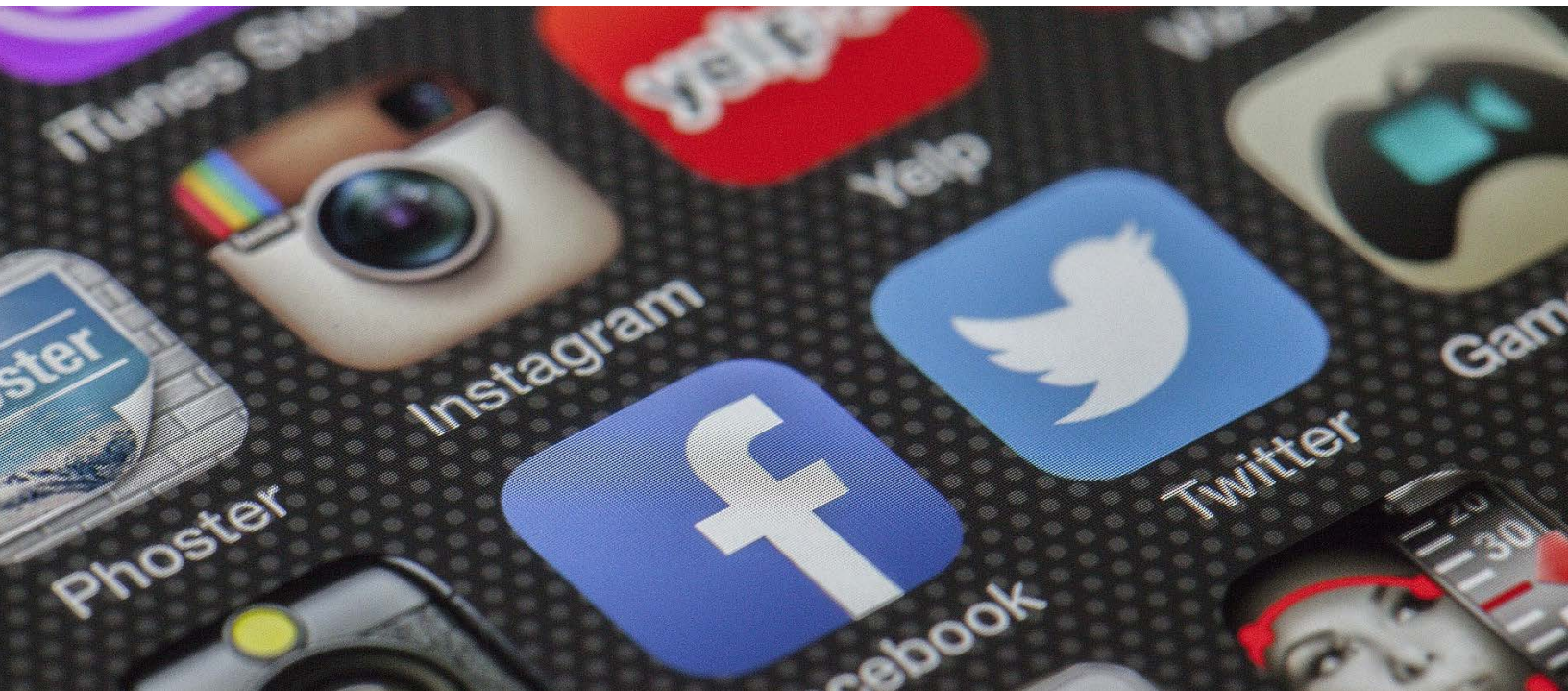




# Provincial Dental Board of Nova Scotia

## GUIDELINES

for the Use of Social Media  
by Dentists and Registered Dental Assistants



*This policy was made with contribution and permission from:  
The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia,  
Dalhousie University Faculty of Dentistry, and Dalhousie University.*

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# Introduction

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Social media is a set of online technologies that allow people to monitor, create, share, or manipulate information through text, audio, photos, or video. Unlike traditional media, which is based on a one-to-many transmission model, social media functions on a mass-communication model; it is global in reach. Social media content is unmediated, instantaneous, and easily altered. Social media sites are highly accessible, informal, and public.

This document provides guidance for registrants' use of social media, which should be broadly understood for the purposes of this guideline to encompass all forms of online media including but not limited to blogs, message boards, chat rooms, forums, social networking sites and other sites and services that permit users to share information with others. This is a living document that will continue to evolve as social media evolves, and does not supplant any other Provincial Dental Board of Nova Scotia (PDBNS) Regulations, Standards or Guidelines, or any federal or provincial laws.

## Professionalism

Dentists and registered dental assistants (RDAs) are responsible to act in a manner that always upholds the integrity of the dental profession. Expectations of professional and ethical conduct are the same whether dentists and RDAs are interacting in person or online through social media.

When using social media, dentists and RDAs must:

- avoid communication with individual patients about anything pertaining to their medical and dental care.
- refrain from giving professional advice.
- ensure all communications are professional, ethical and in keeping with the standards of the profession (e.g. refraining from portraying any unprofessional images of themselves on social media).
- adhere to any copyright, defamation, and harassment laws and rules of engagement governing social media.
- ensure that patient confidentiality is maintained.
- ensure adherence to all PDBNS Regulations, Standards and Guidelines, including but not limited to the Code of Ethics and Advertising Standards.

# Guidelines

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## Dentist/RDA-Patient Relationship

Dentists and RDAs should not initiate an invitation nor respond to an invitation to connect with patients or their family members on social media. If contacted by a patient on social media regarding a medical or dental matter, dentists and RDAs should direct that patient to call the office.

Social media is designed to be informal, to solicit opinions and to encourage commenting and content sharing. Within the casual culture of social media, boundary violations can occur easily. Dentists and RDAs are responsible to maintain appropriate boundaries in their relationships with patients.

In situations where dentists and RDAs have personal friendships or family relations with dental patients, or where such personal relationships develop, care must be exercised to maintain professional boundaries on social media.

## Professionalism

Dentists and RDAs are expected to demonstrate the utmost professionalism and respect. They represent not only themselves but the profession of dentistry.

Registrants are encouraged to review Discipline Regulation 4(4)(c) regarding “infamous conduct”. This includes “*conduct or behavior that is likely to bring dentistry or the dentist....or dental assistant into disrepute whether or not such conduct or behavior is in the course of or related to dentistry*”.

Dentists and RDAs demonstrate honesty, integrity, and compassion. They are expected to:

- be respectful and fair to all persons regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, ability, socioeconomic status, beliefs, and values.
- never harm or intend to harm others by verbal, physical, emotional, or physiological means.
- support those facing medical, dental, or personal challenges.
- maintain appropriate professional boundaries with patients and coworkers.
- refrain from forming new online interactions with patients on personal accounts.
- be mindful that all personal social media activity, including posts or online interactions (ex. like, comment, follow), is considered public.
- be honest and authentic.
- refrain from posting patient cases or information on social media platforms.
- assure accuracy of information being shared.
- be respectful and use inclusive language and behaviour.
- gain permission before using photos of specific people.
- respect copyright laws.
- use sound and ethical judgement.
- refrain from sharing confidential/internal information.
- adhere to brand guidelines.
- avoid personal thoughts and opinions.
- carefully consider which individuals, causes, brands or organizations your account “likes”, “follows”, “shares” or otherwise supports.

If dentists and RDAs identify themselves as healthcare professionals on publicly accessible social media sites, they should also identify themselves by name. Any material posted by those who represent themselves as dentists or RDAs is likely to be taken on trust and may reasonably be taken to represent the views of the profession more widely.

Dentists and RDAs can use social media platforms to share information and discuss dentistry, as well as provide a means for peer-to-peer education and dialogue. They must respect and support fellow dental professionals on public and private social media platforms in all circumstances to promote positive relationships with peers. For example, making unprofessional comments on a Facebook page or a community chat room about another dentist, RDA, or dental office is not appropriate.

## Confidentiality and Consent

When publishing content on social media, dentists and RDAs must follow the rules for publishing patient information in journals, textbooks, and educational presentations. The consent process required when publishing in a journal and presentation is also required for social media.

Dentists and RDAs must never provide any information that could be used to identify a patient, even in a closed or private-online forum. Although individual pieces of information may not breach confidentiality on their own, the sum of published information online could be enough to identify a patient or someone close to them. Privacy settings can be compromised. Content posted on social media is traceable even if posted anonymously. Social media content can be shared and commented upon and, as such, this content lives forever online and is often distributed widely.

## Security

Social media platforms are available for dentists and RDAs to share information and discuss dentistry, as well as provide a means for peer-to-peer education and dialogue. Dentists and RDAs must ensure their accounts are password protected so that only authorized users have access to the information. It is important to update account passwords regularly and avoid sharing them over email.

# Examples

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Examples of unprofessional behaviour by a dentist or RDA in the use of social media include but are not limited to:

- making racist remarks on social media, which could negatively impact their professional relationship with ethnic minorities.
- displaying inappropriate and unprofessional pictures on Facebook (e.g. pictures of an intoxicated dentist or RDA grinning while holding bottles of alcohol at a party).
- responding personally and negatively to a patient's criticism on a social media site.
- making negative comments about a past workplace on social media.
- making negative comments about colleagues on any social media platforms.
- misrepresenting credentials or qualifications online and subsequently failing to make required corrections as directed by the regulator.
- displaying pictures or video on social media that identify or potentially identify a patient without appropriate consent.

Should dentists and RDAs require further guidance regarding their use of social media, it is recommended they contact the Provincial Dental Board of Nova Scotia.