

Policy Statement

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Use of Social Media by Emergency Physicians

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Social media are powerful tools for communication, with direct beneficial applications, including emergency medical education and public health awareness. The risks of social media activity for emergency physicians, particularly when the lines between one's personal life intersect with their professional life, include the potential for inappropriate patient relationships, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act and other confidentiality violations, and presenting oneself, one's employer or hospital, or one's profession in an unfavorable light. In addition, social media can amplify and extend errors in judgment, demeanor, and behavior far beyond historical, nonsocial media interactions.

When emergency physicians engage in social media for professional or personal purposes, it is recommended that they maintain proper ethical and professional conduct standards.

Principles:

- Emergency physicians have the responsibility to ensure that patient privacy and confidentiality are recognized and maintained in their social media activity. Ensuring that no identified or deidentified protected health information is posted is critical, but not sufficient, to meet this requirement. A posted timeline, specific events, or descriptions can reveal more identifying information than originally intended, resulting in inadvertent and unauthorized disclosure of protected health information.
- Improper use of social media by emergency physicians may allow patients or their representatives to be

identified in violation of their privacy. These concerns may even extend to various information-sharing or diagnostic platforms, including crowd sourcing of cases for clinical discussion or input. Verbal consent, either implicit or explicit, for such public disclosure is not adequate for a Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act-compliant authorization for disclosure of protected health information and is not a defense or justification for such disclosures.

- Emergency physicians should maintain appropriate, professional boundaries with patients and families in regard to social media.
- As we recognize, all social media activity may become public and exist indefinitely. As such, emergency physicians should be aware that their social media activity, unrelated to their profession, can reflect on public perceptions of them as a physician, their health care organizations, and the specialty of emergency medicine in general.
- Social media have created an additional area of professional liability independent of clinical practice and can extend to the emergency physician's administrative roles as well. In general, social media content is not protected and is discoverable.
- Emergency physicians should be aware of and follow their employer's and institution's specific policies on the use of social media.

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