The Impact of Social Media on Business and Ethical Practices in Dietetics

An Ethics Opinion reflects the interpretation or application of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (Academy)/Commission on Dietetic Registration (CDR) Code of Ethics for the Profession of Dietetics by the Ethics Committee. This interpretation or application by the Ethics Committee is in response to a specific ethics issue facing the Registered Dietitian/Nutrition (RDN) or Dietetic Technician, Registered (DTR) in practice. An Ethics Opinion is an educational guide for practitioner conduct; it is meant to be a comprehensive review of the issue. The situations described are hypothetical.

INTRODUCTION

The term “social media” refers to web-based or mobile technologies that are used for collaborative information sharing. These technologies provide dietetics practitioners with a number of ways to communicate with and engage peers and the public with the goal of improving health outcomes. This article explores the benefits and risks of social media for the practice of dietetics and outlines professional and personal responsibilities for dietetics practitioners.

DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

In every context of daily life, social media has changed the way we communicate. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines social media as “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content such as videos.”1 Kaplan and Haenlein have classified social media into six categories: blogs, collaborative projects (eg, Wikipedia), social networking sites (eg, Facebook, Twitter), content communities (eg, YouTube), virtual social worlds (eg, Second Life), and virtual game worlds.2 These technologies are now used in a variety of contexts including health care for collaborative information sharing, marketing, recruitment, emergency preparedness, training, and education. Rapid change makes a definitive list of social media sites and applications impractical, but Trafﬁk lists over 400 sites categorized by topic.3

Social networking is now the most popular online activity, fueled by the ability to access social media sites from mobile devices.4,5 Digital natives (15- to 24-year-olds) have decreased their use of e-mail and texting and now rely on social media/social networking.6 Older age groups have also increased their use of social media since 2010.4 That use has created both opportunities as well as hazards for health care professionals who wish to use social media for professional purposes. With social media, the practitioner must now consider the audience, the content, and the technology. Once the “send” or “post” button is selected, the practitioner no longer has full control over the message or the downstream medium.

BENEFITS AND RISKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media used appropriately can benefit patients, consumers, and practitioners. The Academy has a social media presence through blogs (see www.eatright.org) and other social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Sharecare. Many health care organizations and professional groups have a presence on social media sites to provide peer-to-peer connections and provide information to consumers. Consumer-to-consumer sites (eg, PatientsLikeMe6 and CureTogether7) help provide support and guidance to patients and families for chronic diseases, disease prevention, and wellness. Online social networks, such as the international diabetes site www.TuDiabetes.org, participant blogs, and forums can be used for research purposes.8

There are also examples of the risks and consequences of using social media in health care settings. In 2008, a group of nurses used Facebook to provide (unauthorized) shift change reports containing specific information about their patients to staff on the upcoming shift.9 This information quickly was passed on to their “friends,” violating federal privacy regulations. Other incidents include a health care worker posting pictures of a patient record on a social media site10 and a physician “friending” a former patient.11 While the latter example turned out to be a professional connection, the author, Sachin Jain, noted the ease with which personal and professional affiliations can be blurred or confused. In a study of physician use of Twitter, 3% of tweets were considered unprofessional based on potential privacy violations or other unprofessional comments.12

PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Social media removes boundaries, but the rules regarding privacy and confidentiality still apply. Health care information is considered private and, as such, is covered by the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996.13 HIPAA enforces the privacy of health care information as well as the security of moving that information from provider to provider. Personally identifiable information such as a patient’s name, address, birth date, images, and associated health...
conditions may not be shared outside of the “covered entity” without the patient’s consent. There are exceptions for provider organizations, but social media are not included in those exceptions. Individuals may self-publish their own information, but that does not imply nor give a health care provider permission to use this published information.14 The Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology (ONC) has created policies about health data exchange that also provides an excellent summary of the rules for use of mobile devices and the protection of personally identifiable information.15

Electronic health records and associated personal health records and patient portals associated with provider organizations are governed by strict standards to ensure the privacy and security of health information. Personal health records offered by noncovered commercial vendors may not meet the same privacy standards. With the increased use of mobile devices, ONC has also begun an effort to develop best practices for using health data on mobile devices.16 Encryption of mobile devices ensures the protection of personally identifiable information.

E-PROFESSIONALISM
In her article on e-professionalism in dietetics, Sara Aase cites the blurring of personal and professional presence online.18 Many professions are struggling with the same issues and fear that unprofessional interactions or unprofessional content may reflect poorly on the entire practice.19,20 For dietetics practitioners, first consider your professional situation. If you work in a health care institution, or company, what are the corporate social media tools available to you? What are the institutional policies that govern how you use those tools? Health care institutions such as the Mayo Clinic that have embraced social media have developed policies related to professional use of online tools.21 Paramount is the clear distinction of corporate vs personal views and the presentation of factually correct health information. For individual practitioners seeking to participate with the public through social media, the Health Information Management Systems Society (HIMSS) has written a white paper on social media entitled “Healthcare “Friending” Social Media: What Is It, How Is It Used, and What Should I Do?”22 HIMSS’s advice to providers includes clear goals for participation and selecting one or two types of media for your online presence. A clear distinction between your professional and personal online presence is critical to protect and maintain professional credibility.

THE CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND SOCIAL MEDIA
The Academy/CDR Code of Ethics provides a clear framework for dietetics practitioners to ensure the trust of the public and other professionals. Practitioners should ensure that their social media presence complies with the following principles23:

1. Principle #2: The dietetics practitioner supports and promotes high standards of professional practice.
2. Principle #6: The dietetics practitioner does not engage in false or misleading practices or communications.
3. Principle #10: The dietetics practitioner protects confidentiality and makes full disclosure about any limitations on his or her ability to guarantee full confidentiality.
4. Principle #14: The dietetics practitioner assumes a life-long responsibility and accountability for personal competence in practice, consistent with accepted professional standards, continually striving to increase professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice.
5. Principle #15: The dietetics practitioner is alert to the occurrence of a real or potential conflict of interest and takes appropriate action whenever a conflict arises.

The lists below explore areas of professional and personal responsibility to assist practitioners in identifying and maintaining ethical social media practices.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY
1. Content context. Social media has the capacity to reach a heterogeneous audience, whether intended or not. As professionals, the information must fit the audience. Social media is appropriate for general nutrition messages, sound scientifically-based eating advice, or sharing a recipe. It is not the platform for individual counseling or sharing a case study that may violate a patient’s privacy. Clearly state the context of your participation; eg, “Tweets are my own” or “Blogging on behalf of the organization.”
2. A false sense of security. Your intended audience may seem well-defined, but social media has two pitfalls. Once you post information, you no longer have full control of that information and it leaves a permanent digital footprint. A tweet can be re-tweeted; a link can be easily forwarded. Site security settings may not offer true exclusion of the public, or others in your group may compromise the privacy of your information as they may not be attentive to their security settings. Certain social media sites have shared user information without user consent.24,25 Monitoring your Internet presence to ensure information associated with your accounts is accurate and professionally appropriate is now a must.26
3. Compensated enthusiasm. Social media allows participants to endorse a product or offer a testimonial. Rules published by the Federal Trade Commission on what are known as “material connections” indicate that if you are compensated to endorse a product or receive free products (to try or to review) based on your professional expertise, you must disclose your relationship with the sponsoring entity in any of your communications, including blogs, tweets, or pins.27 If you work directly for an organization and participate in social media forums on behalf of your workplace, don’t risk violating the trust of your online community or your employer. Clearly state
your relationship and whether the endorsements or views presented are personal or posted on behalf of your employer. Be mindful of any conflicts of interest, and be careful not to share patient related information or company intellectual property.

4. **Anonymous enthusiasm.** Online platforms make anonymity possible. Don’t use this fact to make overly enthusiastic comments about a product or business for personal gain. Likewise, don’t use that presumed anonymity to make disparaging comments about people, products, or your employer. Lawsuits related to online defamation are on the rise. 28

5. **Media marketing.** Social media is an ideal platform for marketing your nutrition-related skills and services. Blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook business pages, Twitter, and other social channels can allow you to showcase your expertise, offer value, and reach people in new ways. If you have something to sell and decide to join a community that gives your expertise, product, or service exposure, offer professional science-based value to the community. Overt self-promotion abuses the trust of the online community and may lead to being shown the virtual exit door.

6. **Fact or fiction.** Online content should be scientifically correct and held to the same professional standards as a peer-reviewed publication. Often, content is posted that does not meet this standard. When such information is posted on a public site by a nonprofessional, an appropriate professional action would be to tactfully share referenced information. If a dietetics professional posts incorrect or scientifically questionable information, fellow practitioners should step in and present factually correct comments. Online credibility is critical for maintaining a professional perception of nutrition and dietetics practitioners. Several sites are designed to help promote registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) and ensure valid online content such as the nutrition blog community [www.NutritionBlogNetwork.com](http://www.NutritionBlogNetwork.com). At [www.RDs4Disclosure.org](http://www.RDs4Disclosure.org), RDNs pledge to use social media in a scientifically sound and ethical manner with full disclosure of affiliations, employment, and financial or material relationships.

7. **Electronic employment.** The Internet has revolutionized how we find employment or potential employees. Your resume may be polished, but is your online presence equally pristine? Employers often check your online presence, your viewpoints, and what was in your glass last night through comments or photos. 29 Managing your online persona is now a key component of maintaining your professional image. For employers, social media can be a useful extension of the recruitment and selection process. However, a candidate’s online public persona may reveal what the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission call “protected characteristics” such as age, race, religion, or sexual orientation. 29 A job interview is designed to determine whether the candidate can perform the skills required by the position. 30 Experts suggest interviewing a candidate first, and then reviewing online information to avoid inappropriate interview questions or prejudging a candidate’s qualifications.

8. **Account ownership.** A professional may begin an online presence as a part of his or her job. For example, you may blog as part of your current position or have a following on Twitter. What happens when you leave your position—and who “owns” your followers? While the legal issues related to such cases are as yet untested, 31 look to your employer’s social media policies for guidance. Establish with your workplace a clear understanding of what constitutes your personal following vs a corporate “fan base.”

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

1. **Digital competence.** Social media provides the practitioner with a powerful suite of tools. If you choose to use these tools, it is essential that you recognize how to use them effectively. Calvani and colleagues 32 define digital competences as not just the ability to use technology, but also the complex integration of cognitive processes and ethical awareness. Understand how to manage privacy and security settings, as well as the content you develop. Use online content carefully with a professional evaluation of information validity. 33 Do not engage in cyberbullying. Remember that your online presence is difficult to delete.

2. **Regulatory requirements.** Just as you understand rules of the road, make sure you understand rules and regulations governing information sharing. You are free to share information about yourself at your discretion. You are not free to share information about your patients, clients, employer, or fellow employees without their express permission or consent.

3. **On the clock.** Mobile computing has blurred our personal and professional lives. While it is possible to check our personal accounts during the work day, be mindful of employer policies and your professional presence on the job. If you use your personal mobile device for work activities, beware of multi-tasking. In a recent case posted by the Agency for Healthcare Quality and Research, a medical resident using a smartphone for both professional and personal business was entering a medical order on rounds. Interrupted by a text invitation to a party, the order was never completed, resulting in an adverse patient event. 34

## LEGAL ISSUES AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Legal issues related to the use of social media continue to evolve at the federal,
state, and local level. However, dietetics practitioners using social media must be aware of legal issues such as the violation of privacy, protection of copyright and intellectual property issues, anti-trust issues, what constitutes libel, and rules regarding the provision of professional advice. “Legal Risks of Social Media: What Dietetics Practitioners Need to Know” by Matthew Fox, from the November 2012 issue of the Journal, provides insight on this topic. Practitioners should be familiar with state licensure laws, as there may be specific language related to the use of electronic media and scope of practice, privacy rules, or disclosure requirements. An online presence may extend beyond state boundaries. If you use social media for your practice, check the terms of your professional liability insurance to ensure the terms and conditions provide appropriate coverage.

ETHICS IN ACTION
The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has published “Social Media Policies” addressing best practices for the use of Academy websites and social media tools. To review specific examples of ethical issues related to blogging and social media, see Janet Helm’s Ethics in Action article in the May 2013 issue of the Journal. The use of ethical scenarios and examples of marketing disclosures provide illustrative examples to complement the principles in this ethics opinion.

CONCLUSIONS
Social media has profoundly changed our personal and professional lives. These changes have created new opportunities to interact with clients and peers, and positively impact the health of the public. New technologies offer the ability to constantly expand the avenues of engagement with every segment of the population. With these changes, practitioners must be aware of potential pitfalls and stay abreast of changing technologies and regulations. Check your organizational social media policies. If your organization does not have policies in this area, or if you are self-employed, create your own checklist based on the issues discussed in this article and the sample checklist included in the Figure. Consult the Academy/CDR Code of Ethics to ensure your practice habits and media presence remains in compliance. Social media will continue to evolve, demanding additional savviness on the part of users. Let’s continue this conversation for the benefit of our profession and those we serve.

References
The Ethics Committee, Academy Board of Directors, HOD Leadership Team and the Commission on Dietetic Registration approved the Ethics Opinion on August 16, 2013. The Academy for Nutrition and Dietetics authorizes the republication of the Ethics Opinion in its entirety, provided full and proper credit are given. Request to use portions of the Ethics Opinion must be directed to Academy Headquarters at 800/877-1600, ext. 4896 or ethics@eatright.org

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