



Guide for the use of
social media
in general practice



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About this guide

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) recognises that general practitioners (GPs) and general practice staff have embraced social media at a rapid rate, and guidance around safe and professional usage within general practice is necessary. While there are benefits, there are also potential risks associated with GPs and general practice staff participating in social media. Professional and safe conduct online is paramount.

This guide is aimed at general practices that are new to social media, but is also beneficial to those already using it.

During the development of this guide, the RACGP consulted a range of GPs, practice managers, consumer representatives and medico-legal organisations to provide the most up-to-date advice to general practice on the use of social media.



What is social media?

The Macquarie Dictionary defines social media as 'online social networks used to disseminate information through online social interaction'. Social media allows individuals to communicate with others, access information, and share knowledge, experience and expertise on topics of interest.

The use of social media is prevalent throughout general practice. This guide provides recommendations regarding the use of the more popular social media platforms, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and blogs. The advice in the guide can also apply to other social media platforms.

Advantages of using social media in general practice

A huge proportion of the Australian population use social media. Facebook reports to have 9 million Australian users accessing their website every day, including 7.3 million who log in via their smart phone.¹

The widespread use and low cost of social media makes it a convenient tool for general practices to connect with patients and health professionals.

The internet transcends geographical boundaries – social media is an effective way to engage the general public and provides easy reach to people in rural and remote communities.

It can serve as a tool for advancement of medicine by facilitating (local, regional, national, international) expansion of professional networks, information exchange, collaboration, curriculum development, and e-learning among many other professional activities. It is an easy way to network, keep up-to-date, learn, engage, and connect directly to decision makers.

Multiple social media accounts can be used to cross promote, broaden your reach and engage across platforms (eg 'tweet' a link to your latest blog post, post a link to your Facebook page or your general practice LinkedIn profile).

Social media can be used as a primary source of news information. It also gives GPs a platform to express their views about the health system, which helps generate and inform health policy and public debate.

Social media provides a platform for health professionals to educate the community about health conditions, disease prevention and treatment.

Disadvantages of using social media in general practice

Social media has opened up valuable new lines of communication between health practitioners and patients, however, it is crucial that GPs and general practice staff recognise and understand the difference between information appropriate for public consumption on social media and information that should be kept confidential.

Staff must be educated on the risks of using social media. Information posted in their private capacity may reflect adversely on their professional capacity.

Examples include:

- joining an online forum with extremist views
- abusive posts about a colleague or patient
- friending/following a patient
- finding and responding to a patient profile on dating websites.

Staff also need to understand that there could be legal implications if personal information is posted online. They may be subject to a defamation action or disciplinary complaint about unprofessional behaviour. Carefully consider the information you share online, as all information published on the internet can be difficult, nearly impossible, to permanently delete or modify. Once the content is seen by one person, it can be shared and distributed.

Security and privacy settings of all social media platforms should be set to ensure that, where possible, users have control over who is part of their networks and who can view the information they post.

Social media use can be time consuming. A general practice that actively engages in social media is likely to require a dedicated staff member, with a good understanding of the social media platform being used, who can monitor and approve all content that is published.

Practices also need to consider the impact of staff using social media for personal use during work hours.

Although permission to use social media within a practice may be sought and granted for legitimate reasons, this may allow illegitimate use at other times. Terms of usage, authorisation (and scope of these authorisations) should be reflected in your practice's social media policy.

Online conduct

Section 4.2 Respect for medical colleagues and other healthcare professionals of the Medical Board of Australia's (MBA's) *Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia* advises that 'behaving professionally and courteously to colleagues and other practitioners including when using social media'² is essential.

If you can not or would not say the comment in public, then it is unlikely to be appropriate for online consumption. The 'elevator test' is often mentioned as a gauge for what is appropriate to say online and what is not. If your comment would be considered inappropriate by a crowd of strangers in an elevator, it is probably unwise to publish it on the internet. Avoid engaging in online arguments and providing negative responses to comments or feedback.

When to use a disclaimer

If the views displayed on your social media page do not directly reflect that of the general practice, boards or committees that you are a part of, insert a disclaimer that explains this. However, you should be aware that disclaimers may be of little practical use in the absence of supporting or reinforcing activities.



Testimonials

The use of social media by GPs and general practice staff can be regarded as a form of advertising of a health service and is subject to the MBA's *Guidelines for advertising regulated health services*. If anyone leaves a testimonial on your social media profile, it could breach the national law that imposes limits to advertising of health services delivered by registered health practitioners. The MBA requires practitioners to take reasonable steps to remove testimonials that advertise their health services (this may include comments about the practitioners themselves). However, 'practitioners are not responsible for removing (or trying to have removed) unsolicited testimonials published on a website or in social media over which they do not have control.'³

It is up to your practice to ensure that the settings (eg disable reviews or comments function) of your social media websites adheres to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) and MBA guidelines.

For all related codes and guidelines refer to the Codes, Guidelines and Policies outlined by the MBA.

Privacy requirements

Health practitioners and health organisations have a legal obligation to keep patient information confidential and protect the privacy of patients' information. This must be complied with when using social media as the same laws apply to online content. *Section 3.4 Confidentiality and privacy of the MBA's Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia* states that you should be 'ensuring that your use of social media is consistent with your ethical and legal obligations to protect patient confidentiality and privacy.'²

This means that when using social media, staff must not discuss patients or post pictures of procedures, case studies, patients, or sensitive material. This type of material posted online may enable patients to be identified without having obtained consent. You need to be prepared to delete and block information uploaded to your social media webpages in order to comply with your privacy obligations.

For further guidance refer to the RACGP's *Handbook for the management of health information in general practice*.

Security

Before participating in social media, it is important for GPs and general practice staff to secure computers, digital technologies, and internet and wi-fi connections, to ensure that your practice is protected against potential exposure to unauthorised access and theft or loss of personal information.

For guidance and a framework to evaluate risks, and solutions to improve competency and capacity in computer and information security, refer to the RACGP's *Computer information and security standards: For general practice and other office-based practices*

Practice policy

If your practice intends to use social media, you must ensure that you have a social media policy in place and that staff comply with the policy and its relevant contents. You should consider developing a practice code of conduct for the use of social media which reflects the MBA's *Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia*. The RACGP has put together a social media policy template that you can adapt to your practice. See *Social media policy*.

Common platforms and tips for use



Facebook



Twitter



LinkedIn



Share



Blogging



Messenger

Facebook

What is Facebook?

Facebook is currently the most highly used social networking service globally. At the beginning of 2015, almost one billion people logged to the website every month.⁴ Many use it as a way to stay in touch, or as a way to share moments from their life or promote their business publicly.

Advantages of using Facebook

- Facebook offers a way for you to create a page dedicated to your practice, and engage and communicate directly with patients and colleagues.
- Facebook is often used as a directory. A Facebook page for your practice can provide another avenue for patients to find you.
- You can set up links that drive traffic through to your general practice's website from your Facebook page.
- Facebook is a great way for you to build your network with other professionals. Facebook users can create groups for like-minded people to join and build discussions around. The groups are often localised or dedicated to a specific interest.

Tips for using Facebook

The RACGP offers the following recommendation for the use of Facebook by GPs and practice staff:

- Customise the privacy settings on your Facebook page. Facebook

offers various degrees of privacy, from closing a page off to be viewed solely by the user, to having it open for comment and viewing from anyone in the world. On a business page for general practice, you could close comments from outside parties. This will alleviate issues of inappropriate comments being published on the Facebook page.

- Educate staff on social media privacy settings and encourage them to make their personal accounts private.
- If you decide to have a Facebook page for your practice, it is recommended that a staff member is assigned to the task of updating and maintaining the information online. This role should also be clearly defined and documented in the practice's social media policy.
- Facebook has an instant messaging feature, where private messages can be sent directly to and from individuals. General practices should take care in directly communicating with patients or followers of the practice's Facebook page via the messaging feature. There are a number of risks involved in using it as a means to contact patients. Unless a patient has provided consent to being contacted by this means, it may breach patient privacy and confidentiality. It is not a secure line of communication, as the information being sent is not encrypted. We recommend you never use the messaging feature to provide or discuss

any health information due to this inherent lack of security and inability to verify recipients. Refer to the MBA's article on [electronic communication with patients](#).

- When setting up a business page on Facebook, you are given the option to enter your practice address. Once the address is entered, a review function appears on the Facebook business page. This function allows visitors to leave a review or 'star rating' on your Facebook business page. At the time of publication of this resource, there is no way to remove this function once an address has been entered. Any review that is published could be interpreted as a testimonial, however, it is important to note that practitioners are not responsible for removing (or trying to have removed) unsolicited testimonials published on a website or in social media over which they do not have control.³

How to use Facebook in general practice

Work through the [RACGP's Digital business kits](#) to determine whether social media is appropriate for your practice, and how to set up a Facebook page for yourself or for your practice.

LinkedIn



What is LinkedIn?

LinkedIn is an online professional directory of individuals and companies. It is currently the largest professional network worldwide, with 300 million members around the world. Individuals use LinkedIn for professional networking, connecting and job searching.

Advantages of using LinkedIn

- Your practice can use LinkedIn to create a page dedicated to the practice for recruiting staff and providing company information to prospective employees.
- When you are a LinkedIn member, you can search for jobs, join groups, research companies, and network with members of specific groups.
- LinkedIn has many groups and networks that members can join and contribute towards. You can start your own online discussion of a topic that interests you and track the number of replies.

- You can build a curriculum vitae of your work experiences and achievements. It is a medium for GPs to inform their network of their skills and expertise.
- LinkedIn is a popular platform for sharing articles of interest to others across your professional community.

Tips for using LinkedIn

- Choose an appropriate profile picture that creates a professional impression.
- You do not have to connect with everyone who sends you a request on LinkedIn. You can send personal messages to individuals and find out why they want to connect with you. It is recommended not to connect with patients (current/former/prospective).
- The 'Projects' function allows you to add current and past projects that you have developed and contributed to throughout your career. This section provides colleagues and future employers

an understanding of your experiences and expertise. You can provide links to online resources, publications, journals and studies you have contributed to.

How to use LinkedIn in general practice

Work through the [RACGP's Digital business kits](#) to determine whether social media is appropriate for your practice, and how to set up a LinkedIn page for yourself or for your practice.

The '[Getting started](#)' page of LinkedIn offers instructions on how to set up a page.



What is Twitter?

Twitter is an online social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to send and read short messages ('tweets') up to 140 characters long. In a tweet, a person can express an idea, opinion, promotion, photos or videos. Twitter is available for everyone to read, but only registered users can also post tweets. It can be a useful social media tool in general practice as it provides a way to stay in touch with colleagues and follow people and organisations that interest you.

Advantages of using Twitter

- Use Twitter to share information about your practice, be part of conversations, provide useful information and start to build a community.
- You can provide your followers with health tips and information on your practice.
- Your tweets can include a link to other web content (eg blog post, website, PDF document), or a photograph or video.
- On Twitter, you can choose who you want to 'follow'. Following particular organisations or people allows you to receive their tweets on your feed. This also works in the same way for people who follow you or your practice.
- You can choose to follow anyone who has a Twitter account, from friends to celebrities to politicians who might usually be hard to reach.
- You can follow and participate in conversations at conferences using hashtags (eg #gp15conference).

Tips for using Twitter

If you are setting up a Twitter account you, should consider the following:

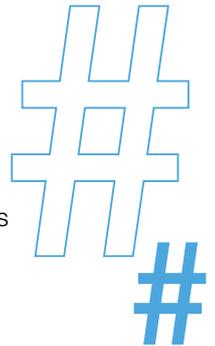
- Decide whether the account is for yourself or the practice (or one for each).
- Design your page to reflect the brand of your practice.
- Start following people who could have an impact on your business and be a valuable source of information (eg the Australian Government, the RACGP).
- Tweet regularly. To increase the popularity of your Twitter account, you should tweet on a regular basis to make it worthwhile for your followers.
- Use Twitter to direct traffic to your website or blog (if any).
- Ensure you maintain professionalism when using Twitter. It is not recommended to seek out patients and follow them on Twitter, however, they may follow your Twitter account for health related posts. Apply your professional judgement if these situations arise and consider what is appropriate in a doctor–patient relationship.
- Do not re-tweet testimonials made by others (regarding you as a GP, your general practice or health service). For more information refer to [AHPRA's Social media policy](#) and other relevant guidelines.

Using Twitter at conferences

Twitter is becoming more popular at conferences, allowing delegates to make comments and suggestion over live Twitter feeds that are often displayed on a big screen that can be viewed by everyone. Twitter can also be used at conferences to ask questions in major plenaries. Be mindful of what you write on these types of Twitter posts as they are publicly broadcast at events and on the internet.

Using Twitter hashtags

A 'hashtag' is a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#) that groups comments together. It is used on social media sites such as Twitter to identify messages on a specific topic.



Public tweets versus direct messages

Direct messages are private and can only be seen by the sender and receiver. However, anything you publicly tweet is not private and can be accessed by anyone including those without Twitter accounts. Keep this in mind when tweeting or responding to tweets to ensure that you are professional and respectful in your online behaviour.

For more information on how to send direct messages, refer to the Twitter Help centre [About direct messages](#).

How to use Twitter in general practice

Work through the [RACGP's Digital business kits](#) to determine whether social media is appropriate for your practice, and how to set up a Twitter account for yourself or for your practice.

The ['Getting started'](#) page of the Twitter website offers instructions on how to set up a page.

Case study: Dr Timothy Senior

Based in Sydney, Dr Timothy Senior has been active on Twitter since January 2011. With over 5000 followers, Dr Senior's Twitter reach includes a varied audience of doctors, other health professionals, academics, students, journalists, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and interested members of the public. While the majority of his followers are based in Australia, he has a number of international followers in the medical field.

Dr Senior chooses to follow people who start interesting discussions, and link to thought-provoking sources of evidence or expertise including academics, journalists or politicians. Although Dr Senior has a wide range of Twitter followers, his 'tweets' explore topics as public health and social determinants of health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, general practice, medical education, politics and classical music. His Twitter account is for personal use and acknowledges his profession as a GP, but he does not post on behalf of a practice or his employers.

Dr Senior has found a significant improvement in his career as a GP from using Twitter. He has been able to link directly with a thoughtful and informed group of GPs across Australia and the world. Twitter links him to research and thoughts of academics and patients, which has broadened his perspective on health and health systems. It has expanded his opportunities, mainly for writing and occasionally for public speaking.

Dr Senior has easy access to his Twitter account via his smart phone and tablet, which keeps him up-to-date and allows for regular tweets. He finds 'tweeting' at conferences to be a great way of keeping informed and engaging with other participants, which can foster an entertaining sense of community around a conference.

He posts a tweet most days and more frequently when involved in Twitter conversation. He tries not

to tweet unless he has something interesting to add, and regularly makes the decision to rethink his tweets and delete these rather than send these when he deems his messages are too sarcastic or cynical.

Dr Senior's rule is never to be dull in his tweets, and often deliberately tries to question or challenge prevailing wisdom. He often tweets about the Medicare co-payment policy, and challenges some of the cultural values of other medical professionals, especially regarding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. He regularly bases opinions on evidence, uses humour and questions, and steers clear of abusive arguments.

Dr Senior's use of Twitter has brought some new opportunities into his life. Through Twitter, he successfully crowdfunded a regular column for the Croakey Blog, discussing the health impacts of various government policy proposals. He has been asked to talk at conferences about using social media as a GP, and now has a reputation as a doctor who tweets, despite this being only a small part of how he views himself.

Blogging

What is a blog?

A blog (weblog) is a website that features a diary-type annotation and links to articles on other websites. Blogs can be used for business or personal use, and can focus on a particular topic or a range of topics. Others are more like personal journals, presenting the author's daily life and thoughts. A general practice or a GP could have a blog and write about their practice, the health sector and health-related issues they are interested in.

How to blog?

- Choose the target audience and a topic to blog about.
- Like many websites, blogs can be set up in a variety of ways, including free, self-hosted via a paid domain and sitting within your current practice website. Free blogs are often limited in functionality, however, it is important to remember that if your blog is hosted on a third-party website, then it is probable that your content will become their property.
- Alternatively, choosing to self-host your blog through a paid website domain address will require a domain name (eg www.thenameofyourpractice.com).
- Blogging platforms offer many designs to choose from. It is recommended that you choose a design that reflects the image and branding of your general practice.

- It is recommended that a staff member is assigned to the task of updating and maintaining the practice's blog. This role should also be clearly defined and processes documented in the practice's social media policy.

The benefits of starting a blog

- As you write more blog posts, it builds information based on your expertise and experience. You can establish your blog as a place where people know to return to gain knowledge on certain subjects.
- You can promote and share your blog on other social media platforms as you post interesting information. This can enable you to expand your network and reach between healthcare professionals.
- An engaging blog is one that educates and inspires your readers. Make your blog helpful by using it to provide general health advice to your readers.
- Your blog can help you establish your online identity.

Tips for blogging

- Blogging is a great way to present your ideas but you need to be wary of your online identity and what you blog about. It is essential to consider the impact of what you are writing on your readers. If you upset certain groups, then this could lead to poor comments being left on your blog and a negative image

to the online community. Ensure to remove defamatory posts.

- You need to be prepared for complaints and learn how to manage them. The way you respond to any negative comments or criticism on your blog can have a significant impact on how you are perceived by your followers.
- It is recommended that you have a protocol or practice policy on managing and monitoring the content and feedback of your blog.
- Dr Edwin Kruys, a GP blogger, has posted 'The no. 1 blogging tip you should always keep in mind'. You may find this advice useful and you can access this on his [blog](#).
- If you are also on other social media platforms, consider posting links to your blog articles.

How to use blogs in general practice

Work through the [RACGP's Digital business kits](#) to determine whether social media is appropriate for your practice, and how to set up a blog for yourself or for your practice.

Case study: Dr Edwin Kruys – Doctor’s bag

Since 2012, Dr Edwin Kruys has started blogging on the website of his general practice in Western Australia. When he moved to Queensland, he started his own blog, <http://doctorsbag.net>, a professional blog, for personal use. Doctor’s bag has grown in popularity and is read all over Australia, with international followers in the UK, Ireland and Canada. He enjoys writing and publishing, and originally began the blog to lift the profile of his clinic. Over the years it evolved into an opinion blog with a focus on the challenges of eHealth.

Dr Kruys lists his three main reasons for blogging:

1. Dispel myths around general practice – his blog attempts to make medicine more transparent.
2. Contribute and provide more reliable health information online.
3. Give readers a new perspective with thought-provoking content.

Dr Kruys blogs several times a week regarding healthcare politics (mainly general practice), eHealth and social media. His primary audience comprises of doctors, patients, journalists and policy makers. He uses his blog as a networking tool and believes it is the interaction that makes blogging and social media interesting and powerful. He considers blogging as a way to share ideas, dreams, opinions and experiences, and stands by the words of business coach Seth Godin: ‘You are doing it for yourself, to force yourself to become part of the conversation’.

Dr Kruys learns from research he does for writing blog posts and from the responses regarding his posts from patients, colleagues and others.

Working in medicine is a cognitive job, but blogging has allowed Dr Kruys to use his creative skills. On occasion he has found his blog has influenced decision makers and made a contribution to the profession. Doctor’s bag has helped Dr Kruys brand himself – journalists know where to find him for comment on health-related issues and he is regularly invited to speak at events. Blogging has expanded his network and given him opportunities to connect with colleagues nationally and internationally.

Dr Kruys’ blog has tackled some controversial topics – some posts and articles about eHealth and the national eHealth record system received extra attention and debate. His posts about pharmacy owners wanting to provide more medical services created upheaval, resulting in angry comments left on his blog. But Dr Kruys welcomes opinions from his readers and aside from an active spam filter, he does not moderate comments. He appreciates the open-access and transparent nature of blogs and wants readers to be able to give immediate positive and negative feedback. He prefers to have negative comments about him on his blog, rather than on another social media page of which he has no control over.

Dr Kruys recommends the following for a blog:

- Try to be of value to your audience, for example, by providing answers and solutions to common problems or issues they may have.
- Share knowledge for free.
- Declare conflicts of interest and consider having a disclaimer, intellectual property statement and disclosure notice.
- Display ‘house rules’ of your blog page (eg ‘Thanks for visiting my website! I appreciate you leaving comments here. However, all comments will be reviewed and inappropriate or offensive comments will be removed. Thanks for sharing and contributing’).
- Don’t give up. As Steve Jobs said: ‘I am convinced that about half of what separates the successful entrepreneurs from the non-successful ones is pure perseverance’.



RACGP's Digital business kits – Social media

www.racgp.org.au/digital-business-kit/social-media

AHPRA policy for registered health practitioners' Social media policy

www.medicalboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Policies/Social-media-policy.aspx

Royal College of General Practitioners – Social media highway code

www.rcgp.org.uk/social-media

Australian Medical Association

Social media and the medical profession: A guide to online professionalism for medical practitioners and medical students

<https://ama.com.au/article/social-media-and-medical-profession>

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The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) has developed a social media policy template for general practices. In a general practice, staff and patients are likely to be using social media to communicate internally or externally. It is important each practice uses this template as a guide and adapts its content to their individual procedures. This policy provides guidance for GPs and general practices staff on the use of social media in compliance with Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency’s (AHPRA’s) Social media policy.

Date of policy

Name of practice

(“practice”)

Name of social media responsible officer

Purpose

This policy provides guidance for general practice on using social media internally and externally. The policy helps identify and mitigate potential risks associated with social media usage.

Definition

‘Social media’ is online social networks used to disseminate information through online interaction.

Background and rationale

Regardless of whether social media is used for business related activity or for personal reasons, the following standards apply to all GPs and practice staff of the practice. GPs and practice staff are legally responsible for their postings online. GPs and staff may be subject to liability and disciplinary action including termination of employment if their posts are found to be in breach of this policy.

When using the practice’s social media, practice staff will not:

- a) post any material that:
 - i. is unlawful, threatening, defamatory, pornographic, inflammatory, menacing, or offensive

- ii. infringes or breaches another person’s rights (including intellectual property rights) or privacy, or misuses the practice’s or another person’s confidential information (eg do not submit confidential information relating to our patients, personal information of staff, or information concerning the practice’s business operations that have not been made public)
- iii. is materially damaging or could be materially damaging to the practice’s reputation or image, or another individual
- iv. is in breach of any of the practice’s policies or procedures.
- b) use social media to send unsolicited commercial electronic messages, or solicit other users to buy or sell products or services or donate money
- c) impersonate another person or entity (for example, by pretending to be someone else or another practice employee or other participant when you submit a contribution to social media) or by using another’s registration identifier without permission
- d) tamper with, hinder the operation of, or make unauthorised changes to the social media sites

- e) knowingly transmit any virus or other disabling feature to or via the practice's social media account, or use in any email to a third party, or the social media site
- f) attempt to do or permit another person to do any of these things:
 - i. claim or imply that you are speaking on the practice's behalf, unless you are authorised to do so
 - ii. disclose any information that is confidential or proprietary to the practice, or to any third party that has disclosed information to the practice.
- g) be defamatory, harassing, or in violation of any other applicable law
- h) include confidential or copyrighted information (eg music, videos, text belonging to third parties)
- i) violate any other applicable policy of the practice.

Privacy and security

All practice staff must obtain the relevant approval from the social media responsible officer prior to posting any public representation of the practice on social media websites. The practice reserves the right to remove any content at its own discretion.

Monitoring social media sites

Any social media must be monitored in accordance with the practice's current policies on the use of internet, email and computers.

Staff responsibility

The practice will appoint a staff member as social media responsible officer to manage and monitor the practice's social media accounts. All posts on the practice's social media website must be approved by this staff member.

The practice complies with AHPRA national law and takes reasonable steps to remove testimonials that advertise their health services (which may include comments about the practitioners themselves). The practice is not responsible for removing (or trying to have removed) unsolicited testimonials published on a website or in social media over which they do not have control.

Any social media posts by staff on their personal social media platforms should:

- a) include the following disclaimer example in a reasonably prominent place if you identify yourself as a practice employee on any posting: 'The views expressed in this post are mine and do not reflect the views of the practice/business/committees/boards that I am a member of'.
- b) respect copyright, privacy, fair use, financial disclosure and other applicable laws when publishing on social media platforms.

Breach of policy

Social media activities internally and externally of the practice must be in line with this policy.



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