

The Nova Scotia College of Nursing (NSCN) is the regulatory body for licensed practical nurses (LPNs), registered nurses (RNs), registered psychiatric nurses (RPNs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Nova Scotia. Our mandate is to protect the public by promoting the provision of safe, competent, ethical and compassionate nursing services by its registrants. The term nurse in this document refers to LPNs, RNs, RPNs and NPs unless otherwise stated.

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Our practice support tools are developed using current reference material. The source of this material is available upon request.



This tool is a resource for nurses in all practice settings to help them understand their professional accountabilities related to their use of social media. Like all regulatory tools, use this document in conjunction with employer policy, applicable legislation and the standards of practice and codes of ethics for LPNs, RNs, RPNs and NPs.

What is Social Media?

[Social media](#) is online and mobile tools used to share opinions, information and experiences through written messaging, images, video or audio clips and includes websites and applications used for social networking. Some examples of current social media platforms include but are not limited to Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, blogs, TikTok, Reddit, discussion forums and message boards.

Risks of Social Media use by Nurses

Social media can benefit clients and nurses. However, there are risks if nurses use social media inappropriately.

RISK TO CLIENTS

- Privacy and confidentiality breached.
- Not seeking and receiving appropriate care based on misinformation, unproven health-related advice, unqualified medical opinions, personal opinions and non-evidence informed health information.

RISK OF PROVIDING NURSING INFORMATION OR ADVICE VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

- Missed care or lack of guidance or follow-up. An interaction over Facebook does not equate to a visit to a primary care provider or an emergency department.
- Informal exchange over social media does not enable the nurses to conduct a comprehensive assessment and physical examination of the client and therefore can lead to inadequate collection of [personal health information](#).
- The nature of online exchanges may prevent the nurse from accurately verifying the client's identity.
- If nursing advice based on an online assessment is provided over social media, the exchange may not be properly retained in the client's medical record.
- Any information the nurse shares online is not considered confidential and could be shared, saved and distributed by others.

RISK TO THE PROFESSION

- Unprofessional, harmful, inaccurate, misleading or threatening on-line behaviors may incite anxiety, panic, or fear and can create distrust in the nursing profession and/or healthcare system.

Nurses Professional Accountability

It is important that nurses understand that their standards of practice and code of ethics can apply to their social media use (including use of social media as a tool to provide nursing services, as part of their professional activities and, in certain circumstances, their personal life). Nurses are encouraged to review, in particular, their obligations regarding confidentiality, therapeutic boundaries and professional presence.

Risk Management

- You are accountable to understand how the standards of practice, code of ethics and practice guidelines apply to your social media use.
- Ensure you understand that inappropriate use of social media may result in a complaint to your employer or NSCN.

Professional Presence

Nurses are expected to use the same level of professionalism in online interactions as they do in face-to-face interactions. When you identify yourself as a nurse online, whether in a biography section, a specific post, or a photo, you immediately create a connection between your personal and professional life and as such, you are expected to uphold your professional standards as a nurse.

Risk Management

- Do not offer specific health-related advice in response to questions or comments, as an appropriate [therapeutic nurse-client relationship](#) has not been established.
- Keep work related social media separate from your personal social media activity.
- Consider the methods you may have available to address work-related incidents, colleague or workplace concerns before posting on social media.
- Consider not identifying yourself as a nurse in your online profile.

Confidentiality and Privacy

Nurses are accountable to maintain the [confidentiality](#) and privacy of clients and co-workers' information. A breach of confidentiality or privacy, even inadvertently, can damage the nurse-client relationship and negatively impact the nursing profession. Breaches occur with far less information than you think. Ensure you report confidentiality and privacy breaches immediately to your employer.

Risk Management

- Ensure you understand that posting anonymously or under a pseudonym does not protect you against the possible consequences of a breach of confidentiality.
- Do not post, repost, transmit or disseminate any information that may be reasonably anticipated to violate the client's rights to confidentiality, privacy, or otherwise degrade or embarrass the client.
- Do not collect or transmit client-related images using your personal device, even with the client's consent.

Professional Boundaries

[Professional boundaries](#) are the defining lines that separate the professional, therapeutic behaviour of a nurse from any behaviour that, well intentioned or not, could potentially harm or reduce the benefit of nursing care. Professional boundaries must be maintained in both in-person and online nurse-client relationships.

Risk Management

- Ensure you define and maintain professional boundaries, especially if you are in the dual role of a friend and a nurse.
- Do not engage in personal social media relationships with current and vulnerable former clients and their families.
- If an online contact becomes a client, make sure you do not unintentionally cross boundaries.
- Do not accept connection requests from or initiate a connection request with current, former or vulnerable former clients or their families. Connecting in this way could be interpreted as a continuation of the [nurse-client relationship](#) or that the client is entitled to access your services in ways other clients are not.

Obligation to Employer Authorizing Mechanisms

Nurses are accountable to ensure they are aware of and comply with evidence-informed employer [policies](#). If your employer does not have a social media policy, consider advocating for and contributing to the development of one.

Risk Management

- Review and follow employer policies related to the use of personal and professional social media.
- Do not speak on behalf of your employer or the profession unless authorized to do so.
- Do not conduct professional discussions or communication on social media without clear employer policies and processes.

Freedom of Expression

Nurses are accountable to balance their right to express themselves (including personal concerns and opinions regarding health care) with their professional obligations and the responsibility to maintain the public's trust in the nursing profession.

NSCN recognizes that nurses' freedom of expression is protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, subject to reasonable limits. NSCN also has a statutory obligation to serve and protect the public interest in the practice of the profession; subject to the public interest, preserve the integrity of the profession; and maintain public and registrants' confidence in the ability of the College to regulate the profession. This includes holding nurses accountable to meet their professional obligations in their social media use.

Nurses hold a position of public trust and their words and actions have the potential to significantly influence public perceptions and behaviour. Professional conduct and communication are important to preserve the reputation of the profession, foster a culture of respect, not adversely impact patient care, and avoid harm to the public while using social media.

Risk Management

- Your online conduct has the potential to cross into [professional misconduct](#) or [conduct unbecoming the profession](#).

Special Considerations Before You Post

Ask yourself:

- Is this the right vehicle to share my thoughts?
- Is this information credible and does it benefit the public?
- Does this reflect my professionalism as a trusted nurse?
- Does the post reflect facts and/or evidence from qualified sources, or does it reflect opinion?
- Will this post reflect poorly on my profession, colleagues, employer, union or others?
- Would it be acceptable for me to say this face to face or in a room full of clients, colleagues or my family?
- Will this post violate my standards of practice, or a condition of my employment?

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SEE AN INAPPROPRIATE POST?

Every nurse has a duty to address conduct that does not meet the standards of practice and code of ethics. If you see an inappropriate post from a nurse, the first action is to address it with the nurse, or their employer or union directly if you feel comfortable doing so. If not, please share your concerns with us by email at practice@nscn.ca.

Check First. Share After.

Key Points

- Using social media as a tool to deliver nursing services is not without risk.
- You are accountable to understand these risks and should you choose to use social media in the delivery of nursing services, you must work to mitigate these risks.

- You are accountable to know how your employer policies, standards of practice, code of ethics and practice guidelines apply and connect to your social media use.
- You are accountable to understand your professional obligation to maintain confidentiality, privacy and professional boundaries.
- Your individual online presence and actions have the potential to negatively impact your clients, other healthcare providers, your employer or the entire nursing profession.

Suggested readings

- [Documentation Guidelines for Nurses](#)
- [Standards of Practice](#)
- [Code of Ethics](#)
- [Professional Presence Practice Guideline](#)
- [Professional Boundaries and the Nurse-Client Relationship Practice Guideline](#)
- [Complementary and Alternative Health Care Guideline](#)

For further information on anything contained within this tool, please contact an NSCN Practice Consultant at practice@nscn.ca.