Patient Privacy and Social Media

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During the last several years, social media has become more prevalent in our personal and professional lives. For health care professionals, posting information on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms requires caution because of the impact it can have on reputations and the risk of violating patient privacy regulations. According to a survey of state medical boards published in the Annals of Internal Medicine\(^1\), the biggest areas of concern (based on the percent of those surveyed who said these actions may lead to an investigation) include:

- Citing misleading information about clinical outcomes (81 percent)
- Using patient images without consent (79 percent)
- Misrepresenting credentials (77 percent)
- Inappropriately contacting patients (77 percent)

Patient privacy was a key issue that was highlighted in the survey with posting patient images to a website without their consent and inappropriate online interactions with patients being cited as examples of situations that caused investigations.

Guidelines for social media use by health care professionals were posted by the Federation of State Medical Boards and the American Medical Association. However, outlining the possible consequences for specific violations is still something that has not been clearly defined, said the researchers who authored the article. “Physicians should be
aware of the potential consequences for online behaviors...and apply the same high ethical and professional standards in their online actions as they would in their actions offline,” noted the researchers. 1Ann Intern Med. 2013;158(2):124-130.

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