



HPCSA BOOKLETS 5 & 16:

YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE IS PART OF YOUR PRACTICE –

Navigating Patient Confidentiality, Social Media and Professional Boundaries



WHY THE TOPIC MATTERS

Healthcare has become increasingly digital. Doctors communicate with patients through email, messaging applications and social media, while practices use platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to educate the public and promote their services. These tools can improve accessibility and engagement, but they also create significant ethical risks.

Patient confidentiality is fundamental to the doctor–patient relationship. Patients must feel confident that their personal information, medical history and treatment details will be protected. At the same time, social media creates situations where professional and personal boundaries can easily become blurred. A seemingly harmless photograph, comment, review response or WhatsApp conversation may unintentionally reveal confidential information or compromise professional conduct.

The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) specifically addresses these issues in **Booklet 5: Confidentiality – Protecting and Providing Information** and **Booklet 16: Ethical Guidelines on the Usage of Social Media**. The HPCSA lists both booklets as part of its ethical guidelines for good practice in the health professions.

The webinar therefore focuses on a practical question: **How can doctors use modern communication tools effectively while protecting patients, maintaining professional boundaries and upholding ethical standards?**

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

1. Confidentiality is a professional responsibility

Booklet 5 emphasises the importance of protecting information obtained during professional practice. Confidentiality applies not only to formal medical records, but also to conversations, photographs, messages and information shared electronically.

Doctors should only disclose confidential information when there is an appropriate ethical or legal basis to do so. Patient consent is particularly important when information may be shared outside the normal treatment context.

Confidentiality should also be considered when responding to online reviews. A patient may publicly identify themselves or make allegations about their treatment, but this does **not** automatically give the doctor permission to disclose confidential clinical information in response.

2. Social media does not remove professional obligations

Booklet 16 provides ethical guidance on the use of social media by health practitioners. The fact that a platform is informal does not mean that professional responsibilities disappear.

Doctors should consider whether a post could identify a patient, undermine public confidence in the profession or create confusion between personal and professional relationships.

Patient photographs, testimonials, clinical stories and case discussions require particular care. Even when names are removed, a patient may still be identifiable from a combination of details.

3. Maintain appropriate professional boundaries

Digital communication can make patients feel that their doctor is constantly available. WhatsApp, for example, can be useful for practice communication, but it can also lead to inappropriate expectations about immediate advice, emotional support or prescriptions.

Doctors should establish clear boundaries around digital communication, including appropriate communication channels, response times, the type of information that may be exchanged and circumstances requiring a consultation.

Professional boundaries should also be maintained when accepting social-media connections or interacting with patients online.



4. Think before posting or responding

A useful webinar principle is: **pause before you post, share, comment or reply.**

Doctors should ask:

- Could this identify a patient?
- Do I have appropriate consent?
- Could someone misunderstand the post?
- Does this maintain professional boundaries?
- Would I be comfortable defending this communication to my professional board?

Digital content can be copied, shared and retained even after it has been deleted. A cautious approach is therefore essential.

Practical Checklist for Practitioners

- Protect patient information in conversations, records, photographs and electronic communication.
- Obtain appropriate consent before sharing identifiable patient information.
- Avoid discussing identifiable patients on social media.
- Do not reveal confidential information when responding to online reviews.
- Keep personal and professional social-media interactions appropriately separated.
- Establish clear boundaries for WhatsApp, email and other digital communication.
- Avoid providing clinical advice through informal channels when a proper consultation is required.
- Consider whether a patient could be identified even when their name has been removed.
- Ensure practice staff understand confidentiality and social-media responsibilities.
- Review the practice's social-media and electronic-communication policies regularly.
- When uncertain, pause and seek appropriate ethical or professional guidance before sharing information.



Key message: *The safest approach is to remember that professional responsibilities apply online just as they do in the consulting room. Confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries and respect for patients should remain central to every digital interaction.*