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[Social Media Policy Adopted by the American Medical Association](#)

Earlier this month, the [AMA announced that it has adopted a social media policy](#) at its mid-year meeting. It will soon be posted on the [AMA website](#); the full text, provided to *HealthBlawg* by AMA staff, is set forth at the end of this post.

The key to understanding the AMA perspective lies in the title of the policy: Professionalism in the use of social media. The front matter recognizes the utility of social media and focuses on the key issue of concern for the Association: Social media "create new challenges to the patient-physician relationship."

Most elements of the policy are commonsensical, and represent the extension of existing norms into the social media space:

- Don't post identifiable patient information online.
- Safeguard physician personal privacy online, understanding that anything posted may remain online indefinitely.
- Consider separating personal and professional profiles on line.
- "What happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas," or, Don't post material that may reflect poorly on the profession.

At least one portion of the policy, though, could potentially impose significant obligations on individual physicians active in social media:

When physicians see content posted by colleagues that appears unprofessional they have a responsibility to bring that content to the attention of the individual, so that he or she can remove it and/or take other appropriate actions. If the behavior significantly violates professional norms and the individual does not take appropriate action to resolve the situation, the physician should report the matter to appropriate authorities.

While physicians may have an obligation to monitor and potentially report misbehavior of professional colleagues in other contexts, the notion that individual physicians should be the AMA's policemen across the internet is somewhat troubling, and may have a chilling effect on adoption of social media tools by physicians.

Here is the full text of the policy:

AMA POLICY: PROFESSIONALISM IN THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The Internet has created the ability for medical students and physicians to communicate and share information quickly and to reach millions of people easily.

Participating in social networking and other similar Internet opportunities can support physicians' personal expression, enable individual physicians to have a professional presence online, foster collegiality and camaraderie within the profession, provide opportunity to widely disseminate public health messages and other health communication.

Social networks, blogs, and other forms of communication online also create new challenges to the patient-physician relationship.

Physicians should weigh a number of considerations when maintaining a presence online:

- (a) Physicians should be cognizant of standards of patient privacy and confidentiality that must be maintained in all environments, including online, and must refrain from posting identifiable patient information online.
- (b) When using the Internet for social networking, physicians should use privacy settings to safeguard personal information and content to the extent possible, but should realize that privacy settings are not absolute and that once on the Internet, content is likely there permanently. Thus, physicians should routinely monitor their own Internet presence to ensure that the personal and professional information on their own sites and, to the extent possible, content posted about them by others, is accurate and appropriate.
- (c) If they interact with patients on the Internet, physicians must maintain appropriate boundaries of the patient-physician relationship in accordance with professional ethical guidelines just, as they would in any other context.
- (d) To maintain appropriate professional boundaries physicians should consider separating personal and professional content online.
- (e) When physicians see content posted by colleagues that appears unprofessional they have a responsibility to bring that content to the attention of the individual, so that he or she can remove it and/or take other appropriate actions. If the behavior significantly violates professional norms and the individual does not take appropriate action to resolve the situation, the physician should report the matter to appropriate authorities.
- (f) Physicians must recognize that actions online and content posted may negatively affect their reputations among patients and colleagues, may have consequences for their medical careers (particularly for physicians-in-training and medical students), and can undermine public trust in the medical profession.

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Update 11/10/2010: Link to AMA social media policy on AMA website provided.

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