



## Position Statement: Social Media in Dietetic Practice

### Introduction

Social media can be an effective nutrition education and promotion tool and can be considered a key technique to communicate with clients, the public and other health professionals. When using social media, dietitians must understand the benefits and risks, and the potential impacts these tools have on the services they provide.

The Nova Scotia Dietetic Association (NSDA) ensures licensed dietitians and nutritionists<sup>1</sup> are qualified to practice in a safe, competent and ethical manner, and addresses public complaints about a dietitian's practice. This position statement is intended to direct practice to ensure public protection and outline NSDA's expectations with regard to the use of social media. Consequences for inappropriate use of social media vary and depend on the particular nature of the conduct.

### What is Social Media?

Social Media is a group of online tools that assist users in developing and exchanging information with others. Examples of social media include blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Linked In, Skype and Instagram.



In dietetic practice, social media can be used for:

- Professional development
- Nutrition education and promotion
- Answering general questions and providing general feedback about nutrition related topics
- Promoting nutrition services or upcoming events
- Increasing dietitians' awareness of the current information that is read by the public, and the views and perceptions that the public have on nutrition topics

### Expectations for the Use of Social Media in Dietetics Practice

*Code of Ethics:* As in all areas of practice, when using social media, dietitians must do so in a manner that upholds the [\*NSDA Code of Ethics for Professional Dietitians\*](#).

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<sup>1</sup> The title of *dietitian* is used throughout the document, and means an NSDA member who refers to them self with either of the profession's protected titles, *dietitian* or *nutritionist*.

*Obligation to employers:* Dietitians must abide by any policies regarding social media set by the organization where they are employed.

*Confidentiality and privacy:* In part due to ease of distribution of information on social media, confidentiality of client information can be put in jeopardy. When using social media, dietitians must:

- Focus on providing general information rather than individualized advice<sup>2</sup>.
- Never post information that could in any way reveal the identity of an individual client
- Avoid interactions with individual clients.
- Avoid using client testimonials.
- Not post case studies based on past or current clients.
- Take precautions (e.g. obtain client consent) when posting photos
- Be aware that information and photos posted on social media will reach an indefinite number of people and should be considered permanent even when deleted or moved.

*Clear evidence-informed messaging:* Dietitians must ensure all information shared on social media is accurate, evidence-informed, current, and reflects best practice. When feasible and practical, it should be clearly stated that the information posted is not intended to replace individualized medical advice.

*Transparency:* When feasible and practical, dietitians must ensure full transparency by stating:

- They are licensed as a dietitian in Nova Scotia.
- They practice according to the *Position Statement: Social Media in Dietetic Practice*.
- The intended use of the social media site (e.g. professional rather than personal)
- How often the site will be maintained.
- Any conflicts of interests and/or disclaimers.

*Professional Image:* Dietitians have the responsibility to uphold the reputation of the dietetics profession. Therefore, dietitians must use professional and appropriate language, and avoid derogatory remarks about their employer, clients, NSDA, the profession and colleagues (even on personal pages). Dietitians must use professional judgment when sharing information on personal pages. Though deemed *personal*, personal pages are in the public domain and are accessible to many people.

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<sup>2</sup> When using Skype please refer to the NSDA's [Telepractice Policy](#).

*Professional Boundaries:* To ensure professional boundaries do not become blurred, dietitians must:

- Keep professional and personal postings and sites separate.
- Not use social media to search for background information on a potential or established client.
- Use professional judgment about how much personal information to share.
- Not entertain ‘friend’ requests with clients on their personal account.

### **Considerations**

- Dietitians should make an effort to stay up to date on technology and social media trends.
- It is difficult to control information posted on social media or the internet. Even when information is deleted or removed, it may have been copied and shared, and will be accessible by unintended audiences, such as clients and employers.
- Time must be devoted to keeping information posted on social media clear, up to date and evidence informed.
- Ensure privacy settings are appropriately set on both professional and personal accounts to protect personal identity and maintain professionalism.
- When posting on social media sites, consider copyright guidelines of the posted material or information.

### **Benefits of Social Media**

Social media is inexpensive to set up and deliver, widely accessible to people of various ages and socioeconomic statuses, a preferred method for the public to access health information, and a quick, efficient way to reach clients and colleagues across the province, the country and beyond. Despite the necessity of being aware of the risks and using professional judgment while using social media, there are many benefits for professionals, clients and the community.

## References

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