Doctors: Think twice when online

By Andre Jurgens   28 Apr 2017

How much information should doctors and other medical professionals share on social media?

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The ethical and legal pitfalls facing health professionals in an age of instant, global communications have become legion.

Getting fired or deregistered are just some of the sanctions. Brenda Kubheka, of the School of Public Health at Wits University, said a new generation of medical students had emerged with "digital footprints" and social media habits "unimaginable to their seniors".

Writing in the *SA Medical Journal*, she cited a study that found 52% of undergraduate medical students admitted to having "embarrassing photos on Facebook".

She warned that the laws and codes of conduct of the real world also apply in cyberspace.

"Failure to uphold ethical standards on social media exposes patients to embarrassment and psychological harm, thus undermining the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence," she said. Kubheka's paper offers some useful pointers on cyberspace etiquette for medical professionals.

They include:

- Think before accepting "friend" requests from patients or sending friend requests to them because of the risk of blurring the distinction between your professional and personal life;
- Sharing patients' photographs might constitute invasion of privacy;
- Do not take photographs of patients without their informed consent;
- Share generic information online but avoid giving direct medical advice; and
- Don't make negative comments about colleagues or patients on social media.

"Professionals ought to ask themselves before posting anything whether sharing certain information is legally and morally defensible," Kubheka said.

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