Social media are omnipresent and in many environments are part of day-to-day reality. These days, people without a Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter account are exceptions.

The term “social media” refers to internet sites and platforms that provide users with so-called social features (networking sites such as Facebook) or enable creative content collaboration (like wikis), information exchange between individuals (forums, blogs open to comments) and content sharing (articles, photos, videos, messages).

These platforms offer vast potential for dissemination, and, unlike traditional media, without third party intervention (television producers or newspaper editors, for example). They are built on social interactions between individuals whose identities are not always revealed.

When messaging on social media, you cannot really know who will read what you post. Your audience is not defined, and it might be very large. Even if your account has strict security settings or only a few followers, all it takes is one screenshot for your posts to become widely accessible. All posts leave traces. Information can be reproduced or shared with others, and it can be very difficult to permanently delete a post or take back control if it goes viral.

Despite these drawbacks, the use of social media appears to be well established. And though technology has evolved, existing rules and laws still apply. These communication tools pose several challenges, as the boundaries between people's public and private lives have become more permeable than ever.

Online social media platforms offer undeniable advantages, but they must be used judiciously. Users must always be careful about what they post online.

Consequently, given the popularity of social media sites, whether intended for the general public or for more private interactions with select users, the Ordre des dentistes du Québec believes that it is important to inform its members of precautions that can minimize the risks associated with this type of communication, and to remind them of certain fundamental principles.

Fundamental principles

You must fulfil your legal obligations

- Professional secrecy is the golden rule, even online. Your patients’ personal and medical information is confidential. A violation of the principle of professional secrecy is a serious ethical breach.
- Information in a patient's record, including anything relating to individual elements in the record (X-rays, models, etc.), belong to the patient. You may not use it in any way whatsoever, either in whole or in part, without the patient’s explicit, written consent.
- You must comply with applicable requirements when obtaining a patient's informed consent, in particular with regards to their anonymity. Be certain that the patient or his or her legal guardian has expressly consented to information about the patient or elements of his or her record being posted on social media, in whole or in part, including on secured sites. Also be sure that the person giving the consent understands the specific features of every social media platform where the information will be posted.
- The rules of the Ordre des dentistes governing advertising apply in their entirety in the context of social media, including with respect to testimonials. No matter the communication mode used, dentists must uphold the ethical rules in force. They may not welcome, use or encourage testimonials of support or recognition in any way. They also may not refer to them.
- Before giving a professional opinion, you must have all the necessary information to do so. Therefore, providing a professional opinion on social media is prohibited. Do not forget that you engage your professional liability every time you express an opinion about a case.
- Communications that a dentist receives concerning a patient, including the opinions of colleagues, whether expressed on Facebook or elsewhere, are part of the patient's record. They must be clearly reproduced, documented and saved in the record. Remember that the information in the record is the patient’s property. The patient alone has the right to its access and to authorize its disclosure.
- Refrain from making negative, gratuitous, baseless or unjustified comments about individuals, groups or organizations. You are liable for any damage to a person’s reputation that you may cause, even through your personal and private profiles.
You must maintain the relationship of trust between the dentist and the public

- Regularly check the privacy settings on the various social media platforms you use. Pay attention to the features that allow other users to identify you in a post or to publish content on your site. Understand that these settings provide no absolute guarantees. Be sure that the appropriate privacy settings are selected and that your messages are sent to the proper recipient.

- Remember that comments made in discussion groups can spread quickly and go viral in a very short period of time. Your comments can be misused, reposted for a much larger audience, and thus have consequences on your professional and personal life.

- Take it for granted that once information is sent through social media, the author is no longer the owner. As a result, you might leave personal information that allows to identify you and your patient. When information is posted online, it stays there, most likely permanently. For example, Facebook’s database saves all information published on its pages. When you delete a post, it becomes invisible, but it remains archived on the company’s servers.

- Understand that a single piece of information can be enough to identify a patient or his or her relatives.

You must maintain appropriate professional boundaries

- Separate your personal content from your professional content (e.g., on Facebook) to prevent anyone from confusing the two.

- Do not publish any specific personal information about yourself on social media without being aware of the privacy settings. Both your patients and your staff might be able to access it easily.

- Do not engage in non-professional interactions with patients on sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter.

- Be aware that social media sites are accessible at any time.

- Before writing emails to your patients from your professional address or through any other online platform, ask them if they agree to these methods of communication and explain that they do not guarantee that the exchanges will be confidential.

- Be aware that it can sometimes take a long time before emails are answered and that this method of communication might be inefficient. If necessary, tell your patients that it is their responsibility to follow up on their emails. The general rule is to be careful when commenting online. Before posting a comment on a social media site, it is wise to make sure that it is true, appropriate and useful. Social media sites are extraordinary development and networking tools. Make sure the way you use them professionally is appropriate.