



# DIETITIANS BOARD

## Social Media and Electronic Communication Guidelines

Social media and electronic communications are online and mobile tools/technologies that allow people to share and exchange opinions and information online. When used well they can be of great benefit to health care: they can facilitate professional connections, promote timely communication with health consumers and family members, and educate and inform consumers and health care professionals.

However their increasing use in professional and personal spheres poses particular challenges for registered health professionals, who must balance the advantages of speedy communication and access to information with their professional requirements to act ethically and responsibly and to safeguard consumer privacy. These guidelines are intended to help dietitians to use social media and electronic communications appropriately.

### Definitions

Well-known social media applications include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, instant messaging, content sharing websites such as YouTube and Instagram, and blogs. Electronic communications include, but are not limited to, email and text messages. Content includes, but is not limited to, text, photographs, images, video and audio files. Social media are evolving constantly.

In these guidelines the word 'consumers' is used to cover consumers of dietetic services in a wide range of settings and may include patients, clients, customers and subscribers. The Board recognises that not all dietitians work in healthcare services so it may also cover fields such as government, administration, publication, sport science, education and research. See the [Scope of Practice: Dietitian](#) for further information about where dietitians work.

### Who do these guidelines apply to?

These guidelines have been developed to assist New Zealand registered dietitians in their uses of social media and electronic communications. Dietitians who use social media and electronic communication should ensure that they comply with the [principles of the Board's Code of Ethics and Conduct for Dietitians in New Zealand](#).

Organisations that use electronic and social media typically have policies governing employee use of such media in the workplace. Careful control over the content of such sites is usually maintained. Dietitians should follow the policies that apply in their own workplaces.

### Principles

When using social media or electronic communications, dietitians should at all times:

#### 1. Respect privacy and confidentiality

- a. Remember that professional obligations to respect the confidentiality and privacy of consumers apply to social media and electronic communications just as they do to other forms of professional and personal interaction. The [Health Information Privacy Code 1994](#) applies rules to the health sector to ensure the protection of individual patient privacy.
- b. Maintain the confidentiality and privacy of consumers. Do not share or communicate health consumer information or practice issues in public places, including on social media or wifi connections where you are unsure of security. Be mindful that a communication or post that you may have intended to be private may subsequently be disseminated - by others to others - regardless of your own privacy settings.

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- c. Ensure that any social media and electronic communication with others, including colleagues and consumers, complies with professional, ethical and other relevant standards.
- d. Be cautious when communicating with patients/clients by email:
  - advise of any limits you would like to place on its use, such as in cases where urgent healthcare advice is required;
  - ensure that the quality of any information you send electronically is preserved (take special care with images and formatting)
  - Remember that it is difficult to validate a person's identity by email. Always double-check before sending sensitive information or use a secure patient portal.
  - Keep clear and relevant records of any healthcare information or advice provided electronically.

**2. Be mindful that the personal and the professional cannot always be separated**

- a. Consider how your posting and/or electronic communication contributes to the impression that others may form of you and the profession of dietetics, and how this might influence how others will interpret your on-line and off-line behaviour in the future.
- b. Remember that commenting on dietetic or professional matters in your personal capacity does not excuse you from your professional obligations as a registered health practitioner.
- c. Remember that anything you post on social media is likely to be read by people from around the world. If, as a New Zealand registered dietitian, you enter into on-line discussions with an individual from another country and go on to offer any health advice, or product endorsement, then you may be subject to the health regulatory requirements of that jurisdiction. The Board's statement on Telehealth should be consulted for further information on this complex and developing area of practice.

**3. Treat others courteously, respectfully and reasonably**

- a. Act responsibly to uphold the reputation of dietitians and the profession of dietetics, ensuring that interaction with colleagues and consumers is polite and respectful, so that public trust and confidence is maintained and the reputation of the profession is enhanced.

**4. Act with integrity to justify consumer trust**

- a. Be mindful of maintaining professional boundaries between yourself and the consumer and/or other people nominated by a consumer to be involved in their care.
- b. Be mindful of Principle 5 of the Code of Ethics and Conduct for Dietitians when considering whether to 'like' or otherwise recommend or endorse individuals or products, brands or services in social media or by electronic communication.<sup>1</sup> Re-tweeting a product promotion or recommendation will probably give the impression that you endorse it even if you have not used it or tested it yourself and that this could potentially lead to a breach of principle 5 of the Code of Ethics and Conduct for Dietitians.

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**This guideline may be reviewed and/or amended from time to time. The most recent version of the *Social Media and Electronic Communication Guidelines* will be available on the Dietitians Board website at [www.dietitiansboard.org.nz](http://www.dietitiansboard.org.nz).**

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<sup>1</sup> See principle 5 of the Code of Ethics and Conduct for Dietitians: Dietitians advertise products, brands or services, only in a manner that protects and supports the health and wellbeing of the New Zealand public whilst also upholding the integrity of the profession.