

## The dangers of social media

DON'T UNDERESTIMATE HOW SOCIAL MEDIA CAN PUT YOUR JOB AND LICENSE TO PRACTISE ON THE LINE.

ALTHOUGH EMAIL, BLACKBERRIES, Facebook and Twitter are useful and fun, it's crucial that nurses know how the misuse of these social media tools might land them in hot water. Following is some guidance and general advice on the issues.

Caution should be exercised when using social media tools that are the property of your employer. If the inclination or need arises, employers can review emails on hand-held devices and the internet browsing history on a computer. Even personal messages on Facebook, Twitter and Myspace, if sent or received on an employer's computer or internet connection, can be searched and the information used when making a decision to terminate, discipline or report a nurse to the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO). If legal proceedings follow, an employer would likely rely on the information collected to support its case.

While online, nurses must also be careful what they 'post.' Employers in the health-care sector are concerned about public image. Any action that even potentially harms that image could place your employment or nursing license at risk. A recent case from outside the health-care world is telling. A group of Virgin Airlines flight attendants posted on Facebook that Virgin's planes were full of cockroaches. This had a negative impact on the company's public image and carried the potential to hurt business. The flight attendants

were fired once management learned of the posts.

Patient privacy also poses a special risk to nurses who use social media. Avoid publicly divulging any information whatsoever about patients, directly or indirectly. This includes more than just a patient's name or medical condition. In a case currently pending before the U.S. National Labor Relations



Board, a nurse treated a police officer for a gunshot wound, as well as the alleged gunman. The officer died, and the nurse later posted on Facebook that she had faced a "cop killer" and hoped he "rotted in hell." The nurse was fired for violating patient privacy. The outcome in Ontario would likely be similar since this type of post violates any number of Canadian and Ontario privacy laws, as well as CNO patient privacy and ethics standards.

Nurses are held to a high standard of conduct and may find themselves in hot water for internet postings that are considered unprofessional. A nurse in the U.K. recently used Facebook to post a picture of

herself sleeping next to a prematurely born baby. Eleven days after the post, that same baby died. The nurse in the photo had given him 10 times the prescribed dose of sodium chloride. She was allowed back to work after an investigation accepted her explanation that it was an accident, but subsequently fired after the Facebook photo was discovered.

and nurses, it is not improbable that patients may ask to "friend" nurses on Facebook or Twitter. The CNO has indicated that it would treat the "friending" of a patient on Facebook as a violation of the standards of conduct, crossing the boundary between a therapeutic nurse-patient relationship and a personal/private relationship.

Social media has increasingly

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Her professional future will be decided by the U.K. body responsible for regulating the practice of nursing.

Similarly, an American nursing student was recently expelled from school for posting to Facebook a picture of herself posing with a human placenta. According to media reports, she apologized and promptly removed the photo, but the school noted her actions "did not exemplify the professional behaviour [expected] in the nursing program" and the expulsion was not reversed. The student is presently before the courts attempting to reverse the school's decision.

Given the nature of the relationship between patients

blurred the lines between our working worlds and our private lives. For nurses, working in a regulated industry for employers concerned about public image and patient confidence, the risks are far more acute. The safest route is to keep your working life as separate as possible from your personal life when using social media. **RN**

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Watch for this legal column as a semi-regular feature in the magazine throughout 2011.