

Case 5: The Political Resident

Brandon is a surgery resident who, since starting medical school, has kept a blog about his views on medicine, medical education, and health care politics. Recently, Brandon has blogged extensively about his extreme political views regarding the upcoming election. His residency director reads his blog and tells him that he must delete his posts and can no longer write new ones, as he is not only a hospital employee and a representative of the residency program, but also a professional who must represent himself accordingly.

Questions for discussion

Is it reasonable for the residency program director to tell this resident that this non-medical blog should be removed? The residency director tells this resident to remove his blog. What would an appropriate response be?

- A. What a resident does on his own time is his business.
- B. He should have asked him to remove the offending posts and be careful in the future.
- C. When you are a student and resident, you are ultimately under the guidance of your dean and residency director.

Case Commentary

This scenario illustrates the tension created by the individual physician's capacity and will to publish and the traditional expectations of an institution. The resident in this case feels strongly about his political views; the program feels that he is not representing the hospital and the program in the most favorable way.

This scenario and others like it represent a new dilemma that has arisen with the democratization of media: individual views may not be in-line with institutional views or the standards of the local professional community.

The scenario also shows the increasingly blurred line between our professional and personal lives. While this resident may have seen his political blog as part of his personal, civic responsibility, our public presence has the potential to impact our professional lives.

While the right to publish should be inherent for all physicians, trainees must recognize that during their training they are under the direction and supervision of others. While residents may ultimately enjoy more independence with their public voice on graduation, they must understand that they will always be ambassadors for their institutions. It is quite conceivable that extreme public views could represent a problem in the relationship a doctor shares with his employer. Trainees must also understand that extreme views on a variety of topics from religion to politics can impact the relationship they share with patients.

Blogging residents and students should be in communication with their program directors and deans regarding their public presence. Not only as a means of getting advice, but as a means of showcasing their thinking and initiative. This type of mentorship concerning a physician's public presence may begin to emerge as a new kind of role in academic medicine. In this case, a pre-emptive discussion with his program director might have resulted in insight or advice that would have given him the opportunity to change his voice and tone.

The evolving role of the public physician creates responsibilities both for the individual doctor and the institutions that employ them. The physician must be sensitive to the needs and wishes of his hospital and professional community. His hospital must recognize and respect within limits the new role of physician as an individual voice.

Educator Notes

This vignette serves to discuss the balance of professional and personal obligation in a world where our boundaries are becoming blurred.

There's lots of discussion that can surround this case:

In a different situation, could a visible public presence actually help a medical student or resident professionally? This point is important in illustrating the positive role that public visibility can play. A student with strong, important ideas expressed with solid content has the potential to be recognized. This can influence one's career in a positive way.

Are there any topics that are touchy for public dialog? The democratization of media has given every physician the capacity to publish. Consequently, every physician in their capacity of publisher has to determine how and to what extent they will use new media to share ideas. Religion and politics are subjects that are prone to polarization and should be approached carefully.

Is it possible to separate our personal and professional lives? This question is interesting in that recent guidelines have suggested that physicians maintain 'dual citizenship' in their public lives. The separation of our personal and professional lives is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain. And consequently, students should assume that whatever they share publicly has the potential to be seen by peers and patients.

Is there any way that this resident could have prevented this scenario and saved his blog?

What role does or should a hospital or professional group have in influencing the personal public behavior of its members?

Bottom line

- All medical students with a public presence are ambassadors for their schools

- The right to publish and converse publicly as a doctor comes with a responsibility
- Trainees bear the responsibility of seeing that their content/dialog is in-line with the expectations of their schools and programs.

Case developed through the Baylor College of Medicine Digital Smarts curriculum.

Toolkit Considerations

- ***There is no right answer*** – discussions about professionalism rarely have clear answers, and social media is no exception. The toolkit serves as a starting point for discussion.
- ***This is not a social media usage policy*** – while these cases illustrate important considerations for social media usage, this is not intended to be a usage policy. For help with a usage policy, we have included a link to policy guidelines from the Federation of State Medical Boards.
- ***This toolkit is designed to be flexible*** – this toolkit can be used in small or large groups and by students and faculty of all comfort levels.
- ***No expertise needed*** – though the focus of this toolkit is on social media, the discussions are rooted in professionalism. The toolkit was written to provide enough context for the casual user to facilitate a discussion.
- ***Contribute forward*** – as you moderate these discussions, consider taking the students’ discussion points, incorporating them back into the toolkit, and sharing the toolkit with your colleagues.