

Information on Social Networking and Medical Student Activities

Social networking tools, referred to as Web 2.0 applications, have taken advantage of current information sharing technologies and have also created privacy hazards for users by posting material made available to the public¹. With the advent of services that provide social networking such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, the wealth of personal information on the Internet is daunting and expansive. Students of the Net Generation, born since 1982, are well versed in the attitudes and practices of information and communication technologies² and use social online tools on an everyday basis. The wealth of information and sources available online has enhanced learning, made it feasible to stay connected with friends and family, and has globalized the world of information.

Web 2.0 applications have allowed for a wide range of uses, including the posting of photos, conversations with fellow classmates, and general comments for the public to view. Since interactions and comments posted on networking sites are material available to the public, today's medical students have become more cognizant than ever of their online actions. Not only do students' comments and posts reflect their personal opinions, but also act as a conduit to their respective medical schools and the field of medicine. Additionally, Web 2.0 applications are not only used by students in their private lives; medical educators also utilize these same technologies as a way to enhance the teaching process. In 2010, researchers at The George Washington University School of Medicine reported that 126 of 134 (95%) U.S. medical schools have a Facebook presence, with either a school-supported page, a medical student formed group, or alumni group, and social networking guidelines are useful tools to appropriately outline what is expected of students³. As such, many medical students find it difficult to find appropriate balance between their professional, public and private use of Web 2.0 applications.

In a survey sent to 132 U.S. medical schools in 2009, 47 of the 78 schools that responded reported that their students posted unprofessional online content ranging from violations of patient confidentiality, to discriminatory language, to depiction of intoxication⁴. While 128 of the 134 U.S. medical schools have Internet usage guidelines, only 13 schools have policies specifically mentioning the use of social networking sites³. The lack of specific information available to students guiding their usage of Web 2.0 applications has the potential for questionable material to surface on public websites. As such, many medical schools are currently in the process of developing guidelines and policies that direct students in maintaining professionalism within the online arena. Included in this summary are listings of some of the policies that are already in place.

Social media policies in place in US Medical Schools, 4/2011

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2941429/table/T0001/>

<http://academicdepartments.musc.edu/webcopyright/socialnetworking.html>

¹ McGee JB, Begg M. What medical educators need to know about "Web 2.0" *Med Teach*. 2008;30:164–9.

² Kennedy G, Gray K, Tse J. 'Net Generation' medical students: technological experiences of pre-clinical and clinical students. *Med Teach*. 2008;30:10–6

³ Kind T, Genrich G, Sodhi A, Chretien KC, Social Media Policies at US Medical Schools, *Med Educ Online*. 2010 Sep 15

⁴ Chretien KC, Greyson SR, Chretien JP, Kind T. Online posting of unprofessional content by medical students. *JAMA*. 2009;302:1309–15.