

The role of the doctor in the wider world

Support and guidance for trainees
as representatives of the profession

Societal Role

The role of doctors is changing and with that how we engage with society and the wider world.

As a profession we, in contrast to some professions, have maintained public confidence with recent polls reporting 91% trust in doctors¹.

Undoubtedly there are currently many challenges facing clinicians, and healthcare as a whole, but it is crucial that we maintain public trust to be able to continue to provide high quality care and good patient-doctor relationships.

How we engage with society outside of our work place is very important in maintaining this confidence and trust, and how we conduct ourselves across various platforms shapes the public's view of the profession as a whole. Engagement with the public is becoming increasingly complex, particularly with the rapid development of technology and use of social media. Technology can be used to our advantage to improve care, share knowledge, and empower patients, but it is important that we are aware of the drawbacks and challenges as well.

As members of society it is important that doctors can express their opinions but it is vital that this is done in a way that is respectful of others who may disagree with you and that communication is carried out within the scope of guidance from our professional bodies.

¹ Ipsos Mori poll 2016.

Responsibilities of a doctor

GMC guidance clearly outlines the duties of a doctor.

There are some key elements of the 'Duties of a Doctor' guidance that apply directly to our role in society.

Treat patients with respect and dignity

Respect patients' right to confidentiality

Be honest and open and act with integrity

Never abuse your patients' trust in you or the public's trust in the profession

GMC Good Medical Practice states:

65. You must make sure that your conduct justifies your patients' trust in you and the public's trust in the profession.

69. When communicating publicly, including speaking to or writing in the media, you must maintain patient confidentiality. You should remember when using social media that communications intended for friends or family may become more widely available.

When considering our role in society it is vital that we keep these duties in mind in all interactions we have with the public.

Online Presence

“The use of social media has blurred the boundaries between ‘public’ and ‘private’ and changed the way in which online aspects of private lives are accessible to others” GMC

The standards expected of a doctor when using social media are the same as those which apply to face-to-face communications.

When interacting online assume that the information you share could be seen by anyone, this includes patients, colleagues and the wider public. Therefore maintaining confidentiality is crucial.

There is a risk when discussing cases, particularly those which are rare or within a geographically small area, that patients or relatives may identify an individual. It is therefore vital that individual patients are not discussed on social media platforms.

Off-hand comments made about colleagues online may seem innocuous. But negative comments can come across as bullying or harassment even if that was not the intention. This also applies to comments about organisations. Online posts are subject to the same defamation laws as written or verbal comments.

If you identify yourself as a doctor online you should identify yourself by name. We must acknowledge that a statement made by a person identifying themselves as a doctor is likely to be trusted by the public and may be viewed as a representative of the profession. It is important to remember that even if using a pen name online if you breach GMC guidance you are still subject to exactly the same disciplinary procedures.

Social Media

As a profession it is important that we engage with the public. Social media can be an effective tool for doing this and can prompt public health and policy discussion, establish national and international networks, and widen access to information.

However these online platforms should not be used to give out personalised advice or information. Some NHS trusts do provide advice online for patients but it is important that this type of service remains one which sign-posts individuals to a healthcare professional for further advice offline or gives only general advice/tips to patients.

The advice regarding the best response to receiving a 'friend request', to a personal social media account, from a patient is currently mixed. The BMA and GMC advise that it is best to politely refuse whilst other medical bodies advise ignoring the request. The sentiment of maintaining a professional relationship is the key to these recommendations. Ideally a separation should be maintained between professional and personal life.

The views of doctors carry a lot of weight. It is essential that we take this responsibility seriously and use evidence where appropriate to inform and justify views we may express.


Some modes of social media are not ideal for expressing complex ideas or issues, such as twitter, with a limited character count. This is worth considering when engaging in complex discussions online.



Interacting with the public

Guidance around interactions with the public is applicable to both face-to-face and online communications. The trust in doctors is important so when representing the profession, particularly in the public sphere, it is essential that the information that is given is factual and that you act with integrity. Doctors can find that they will be asked to speak to groups out-with their place of work, for example to give careers guidance to school children or provide basic health education at a social club. The public you encounter in these situations may have had very little contact with the medical profession prior to this.

In any context that you are speaking to the public as a doctor you are representing the whole of the profession. It is paramount that you;

A female doctor with brown hair in a ponytail, wearing green scrubs and a stethoscope, is standing in profile and writing on a whiteboard. The whiteboard is mounted on a wall and has a wooden frame. The text on the whiteboard is written in a teal color. The background is a bright, indoor setting with a window and a green plant on the right.

Act with integrity and honesty

Do not abuse the public's trust in you

Do not give information beyond the scope of your work and acknowledge if you are unsure of something

Maintain confidentiality

Useful Resources

https://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical_guidance/30173.asp GMC
| Doctors' use of social media: Guidance

<https://www.mpts-uk.org/>

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/employment/ethics/social-media-guidance-for-doctors>

<http://www.rcgp.org.uk/social-media>

<https://www.medicalprotection.org/uk/casebook/casebook-september-2013/on-deadly-ground>

<https://www.medicalprotection.org/uk/practice-matters-issue-7/are-you-social-media-savvy>

<https://www.themdu.com/guidance-and-advice/guides/guide-to-social-media>

