



Use of the internet and electronic communication

Key points about the use of the internet and electronic communication

Information that patients obtain on the internet can influence their understanding of their condition, and their communication with their doctor. If your patient has researched their condition or treatment online, use that as an opportunity for further discussion with your patient, and explain that internet research cannot replace a consultation with a doctor.

Consider issues of privacy, security and sensitivity when you communicate any health information electronically and ensure that you comply with the Health Information Privacy Code 2020.

Information on social media can spread quickly and widely. Be careful with the information you share where that can be accessed by any member of the public.

Exercise restraint when using social media to seek information about your patient. If there are medical grounds to view your patient's website or online profile, seek their permission first, and verify that information before using it to inform your clinical decisions or before entering it into the patient's records.

- 1 The internet, email and other methods of electronic communication are useful tools in the delivery of health care. They help health professionals communicate with patients and one another, find information and participate in specialised, worldwide medical discussion groups. The internet can also empower patients and allow them to inform themselves about their illness and treatment.
- 2 You need to be aware of the applicable guidance surrounding communication with patients. Any electronic communication with patients needs to observe this guidance and not put patient safety at risk.
- 3 Patients have rights under New Zealand's privacy laws and the Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights with respect to electronic communication, as they do with all other forms of communication.
- 4 Inappropriate communication, including use of social media, can also be considered unprofessional, whether this is directly related to a doctor's work or not.

Use of the internet for information by patients

- 5 Patients sometimes come to doctors with detailed information about their conditions obtained from the internet. You should not discourage patients from using the internet to research their condition or treatment, but may need to advise them that internet research cannot take the place of a consultation.

- 6 Patients who get information from the internet may wish to discuss this with you. You should use this as an opportunity to talk about how sometimes the information obtained from these sources may be of poor quality, incorrect, or create unrealistic expectations. Provide sound reasons for the views you express and, where possible, provide documentation, to support the alternative advice or treatment that you are recommending.

Use of email and other forms of social media

Communication of health information

- 7 Whatever method you use to communicate health information, you must consider issues of privacy, security and the sensitivity of that information. The Health Information Privacy Code 2020 applies rules to the health sector to ensure the protection of individual privacy. You must ensure that you act within the rules it outlines¹.
- 8 Email and other electronic media provide a quick and efficient form of communication that is often used by patients. However, if you choose to use or accept this form of communication you should advise your patients of any limits you would like to place on its use. For example, you should advise patients not to use email if urgent advice is required.
- 9 If you send patient information electronically, ensure that the quality of the information is preserved (taking particular care with images and formatting).
- 10 There are security issues specific to the use of email. It is difficult to verify a person's identity from an email; some families and groups share a common email address; and computers (particularly family computers) may be accessed by a number of different people. For these reasons, check with the patient before sending them sensitive information by email.
- 11 You must keep clear and accurate patient records that include any information provided electronically by the patient that:
- is clinically relevant
 - reflects a decision he or she has made about treatment
 - is needed for the provision of ongoing care (such as a change in contact details).

In addition, the patient record must include any correspondence you send to the patient that includes:

- relevant clinical information
- options for treatment
- decisions made and the reasons for them
- the proposed management plan.

Use of social media

- 12 Be careful when sharing information using social media platforms where it can be accessed by members of the public. Do not disclose information about yourself that might undermine your relationship with patients, or that might identify and cause distress to colleagues, patients and their families.
- 13 Patients have expectations of privacy and may choose not to disclose certain information to you in a clinical setting — even when that information is openly accessible online. If you consider that it is medically necessary to view patients' websites or online profiles, seek their permission before accessing those sites and explain why you wish to do so. You should also confirm the accuracy and relevance of online information with the patient before using it to inform your clinical decision-making or entering it into the patient record.

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This refreshes the December 2016 statement. It is scheduled for full review by July 2024. Legislative changes may make this statement obsolete before this review date.

¹ For further information on health privacy information, refer to the chapter on 'The purpose of medical records and notes' in *Cole's medical practice in New Zealand*. For technical assistance to ensure your system is secure and allows for the safe exchange of health information refer to the Ministry of Health's *Health Information Security Framework*.