



Statement on use of the internet and electronic communication

1. The internet, email and other methods of electronic communication are useful tools which can 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. However, you need to be aware of the limits of any method of communication you or your patients use and to ensure that you do not attempt to provide a service which puts patient safety at risk.
3. You are also reminded that 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.

Use of the internet for information by patients

4. 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 remind them that internet research cannot take the place of an in-person consultation. You may also refer patients to the Council's resource, *You and your doctor*, which offers advice for patients on using the internet to look for information about a condition or treatment.
5. Patients who obtain information from the internet may wish to discuss this with you. You should use this as an opportunity to discuss the quality of the information with your patient. Sometimes the information obtained by the patient may be of poor quality and/or creates certain expectations. In such cases you must take care to provide sound reasons why the patient should reject the information 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

6. 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 1994 applies rules to the health sector to ensure the protection of individual privacy. You must ensure that you act within the rules it outlines¹.
7. Email and other electronic media provide a quick and efficient form of communication that is often appreciated by patients. However, if you choose to use 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.

¹ For further information on health privacy information refer the chapter on 'Medical records and patient access to information' 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 Health Network Code of Practice (published by Standards New Zealand) or the Ministry of Health's *Health Information Security Framework: Essentials and Recommendations*.

8. If you send patient information electronically, ensure that the quality of the information is preserved (take particular care with images and formatting).
9. 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, you should check with the patient before sending him or her sensitive information by means of email.
10. You must keep clear and accurate patient records that report 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 report 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.
11. When publishing information on the internet, you should comply with the principles of the Health on the Net Foundation (HON) Code of Conduct².

Use of social media

12. You should exercise caution when publishing information where it can be accessed by members of the public. In particular, do not disclose information about yourself that might undermine your relationship with patients. Similarly, do not disclose information that might identify and cause distress to colleagues, patients and their families³.
13. You must exercise restraint in using social media to seek out information about your patients. 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. 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.

² Information regarding HON's Code of Conduct is available from www.hon.ch

³ A resource jointly developed by medical associations in New Zealand and Australia, "Social media and the medical profession" contains comprehensive advice for doctors and students on the use of social media. This resource discusses a number of cases where doctors and other health professionals faced employment or disciplinary action after posting unprofessional content online. Copies of this resource are available online, and you can also contact the New Zealand Medical Association or the New Zealand Medical Students Association for a copy.

Related resources

- Doctors and health related commercial organisations
- The maintenance and retention of patient records
- Information, choice of treatment and informed consent
- Statement on telehealth
- You and your doctor
- Good medical practice
- *Social Media and the Medical Profession* (published by New Zealand and Australian medical associations and medical student associations)
- *Clinical images and the use of personal mobile devices : A guide for medical students and doctors* (published by the New Zealand Medical Association and the New Zealand Private surgical Hospitals Association Inc)
- The Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights

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This statement is scheduled for review by December 2021. Legislative changes may make this statement obsolete before this review date. The contents of this statement supersede any inconsistencies in earlier versions of the statement.
