

The widespread use and low cost of social media makes it a convenient tool for general practices to connect with patients and health professionals, and vice versa.

Multiple social media accounts can be used to cross-promote content, broaden your reach and engage across platforms (eg 'tweet' a link to your latest blog post, post a link to your Facebook page or your general practice LinkedIn profile). Social media can be a source of news, and it also gives GPs a platform to express their views about the health system, which helps generate and inform health policy and public debate.

Social media provides a platform for health professionals to educate the community about health conditions, disease prevention and treatment. If done well, your social media platforms can be a source of evidence-based information that people use and trust.

The Medical Board of Australia's (MBA's) *Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia*, section 4.2.3, advises that 'Behaving professionally and courteously to colleagues and other practitioners including when using social media' is essential.

Testimonials

The use of social media by GPs and general practice staff can be regarded as a form of advertising of a health service and is subject to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency's (AHPRA's) *Guidelines for advertising regulated health services*. If anyone leaves a testimonial on your social media profile, it could breach the national law that imposes limits on advertising of health services delivered by registered health practitioners. AHPRA requires practitioners to take reasonable steps to remove testimonials that advertise their health services (this may include comments about the practitioners themselves). However, 'practitioners are not responsible for removing (or trying to have removed) unsolicited testimonials published on a website or in social media over which they do not have control'.⁵

It is up to your practice to ensure that the settings of your social media websites adhere to AHPRA and MBA guidelines (eg disable reviews or comments functions). For all related codes and guidelines, refer to the codes, guidelines and policies outlined by the MBA.

AHPRA and the National Boards have published a [self-assessment advertising tool](#) and a testimonial tool to help health practitioners comply with the national law. The RACGP has also developed a factsheet, '[Responding to online reviews](#)', that provides further information about using testimonials.

<https://www.ahpra.gov.au/Resources/Advertising-hub/Resources-for-advertisers.aspx>

Practice policy

If your practice intends to use social media, you must ensure that you have a social media policy in place and that staff comply with the policy and its relevant content. You should consider developing

a practice code of conduct for the use of social media that reflects the MBA's *Good medical practice: A code of conduct for doctors in Australia*. The RACGP has put together a social media policy template that you can adapt to your practice.

Tips for using Facebook

The RACGP offers the following tips for the use of Facebook by GPs and practice staff.

- Customise the settings on your Facebook page. Facebook offers various degrees of privacy and accessibility for pages, from closing a page off, accessible only to the owner of the page through to a public profile where anyone can view and make comments on the page. An example of customising a business page for a general practice might be to prohibit visitor posts from outside parties. This would prevent inappropriate comments being published on the Facebook page.
- An automatically generated Facebook page for your practice may already exist. Facebook will create an unofficial page when someone 'checks in' to a place or business that doesn't have an existing official page. You can claim an unofficial page by clicking on the 'Is this your business?' link.
- If you decide to have a Facebook page for your practice, it is recommended that a staff member is assigned the task of updating and maintaining the information posted on your page. This role should be clearly defined and documented in the practice's social media policy.

Facebook has an instant messaging feature, where private messages can be sent directly to and from individuals. There are a number of risks involved in using this feature as a means of contacting patients. It is not a secure line of communication, as the information being sent is not encrypted. The RACGP recommends that this feature is not used due to its lack of security and inability to verify recipients. Refer to the MBA's advice on [electronic communication with patients](#).

- A review tab is added as a default when you set up a Facebook business page, which allows visitors to leave a review or 'star rating' on your page. Because any review that is published could be interpreted as a testimonial, the RACGP recommends you disable the review tab to remove reviews and 'star ratings' from your page. This can be done by going to 'Settings' > 'Edit page'. Alternatively, you can remove this feature by changing the category of your practice's page category to 'Community organisation'; however, you will lose some features of the business page if you do this.

Australian Medical Association, *Social media and the medical profession: A guide to online professionalism for medical practitioners and medical students*

<https://ama.com.au/article/social-media-and-medical-profession>

National Boards and Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, 'Social media policy for registered health practitioners'

www.medicalboard.gov.au/Codes-Guidelines-Policies/Social-media-policy.aspx

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, 'Responding to online reviews'

www.racgp.org.au/running-a-practice/technology/business-technology/social-media

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, *Information security in general practice*

www.racgp.org.au/running-a-practice/security/protecting-your-practiceinformation/information-security-in-general-practice

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, *Privacy and managing health information in general practice*

www.racgp.org.au/running-a-practice/security/protecting-your-practiceinformation/privacy

Royal College of General Practitioners, *Social media highway code*

www.rcgp.org.uk/social-media