Social media etiquette guidelines for IADVL members Jan 15th 2025

Prepared by IADVL ethics committee 2023 and 2024

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Social media is defined, as per the World Medical Association (WMA), as 'a collective term for the different platforms and applications that allow user-generated content to be created and shared electronically'. India was home to **462.0 million** social media users in January 2024, equating to **32.2 percent** of the total population. This number has been increasing exponentially in the past half a decade and is expected to increase as rapidly in the years to come.

Social media, while providing an excellent opportunity for health education for all physicians, can be a double edged sword fraught with mora, legal and ethical challenges when it is used in a professional capacity.

The following document is an endeavour initiated by IADVL ethics committee 2022-23 and 2023-24 to provide guidance to Indian dermatologists regarding ethical and legally sound usage of social media while attempting to differentiate dermatologists from unqualified influencers in the public eye. It is based on the NMC code of ethics 2002 and is very different from guidelines of western world where physicians are not forbidden from endorsing products. The first part containing the guidelines was approved in the annual general body meeting during DERMACON in February 2024; the second part elucidating the penalty matrix was approved by the IADVL central council in August 2024. The document was mailed by info@iadvl.org to all the email ids of IADVL members on 2nd Feb, 2025 for perusal, made available on scanning a QR code displayed in the AGBM hall and by IADVL general body in February 2025 in Jaipur. It was **approved by the general body in February 2025.**

Moral policing and condescension are not the aim of these guidelines. Rather, these guidelines would help dermatologists withstand pressure of social media in giving in to unprofessional behaviour and help them battle misinformation that is all too easily accessible to gullible public.

Aims:

1. To safeguard the skin health and well-being of lay public and to prevent their exploitation by unethical practices on social media followed intentionally or unintentionally by dermatologists, physicians and people who belong to diverse walks of life
2. To ensure that dignity of the fraternity and the association are maintained in the

public eye and in the eyes of the law

3. To differentiate dermatologists from cosmetologists and various other wannabes so that the fight against quackery on social media is eased partly
4. To prevent trolling of conscientious dermatologists by the lay public by laying down clear guidelines to prevent misinterpretation of their unwillingness to indulge in unethical or illegal practices
5. To create an example for “skin influencers” regarding disseminating facts that hold up to scrutiny

The headings:

- General guidelines
    - What does social media include
    - Basic tenets for IADVL members
- Professional communication on social media
- Punitive measures

General guidelines

1. What does social media include:

An internet based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities. At this point of time, it includes

I) Whatsapp

II) Facebook

III) Instagram

IV) Twitter (x)

V) Linkedin

And would include internet applications that may be introduced in future that serve the same purpose.

2. Basic tenets for IADVL members

I) Respectful dignified behaviour – our professional standards remain the same whether communicating through social or traditional media.

II) Slander, libel and making derogatory statements on social media about any object, person or organization (including a professional body such as IADVL) may put one at risk of prosecution and/or penal action.

Defamation is the communication or publication of false information about a person or certain organisations that damages their reputation. Material posted online by individuals or organisations that are false, untrue, misleading or deceptive can have significant legal and financial consequences.

One is responsible for all the content made from their profiles. However, nobody is expected to monitor social media for things that may be written about them in forums they don't control. Exercise caution while tagging colleagues and friends unless it is clear that they would not object to being associated with the post.

III) Maintain separate handles/profiles for personal and professional facets of life. Carefully choose who you allow access to, particularly to your personal profiles.

IV) Friend requests that show up on one's personal profile may be directed to the professional network page/handle.

V) Remember that you are always a doctor. Do not post anything that would make you or your parents feel awkward in case they come across it. This includes nudity, expression of opinions that may be considered discriminatory by religious / political/ LGBTQ groups, use of recreational drugs including alcohol etc. Your professional calibre and character may be judged by the image you present on your personal profiles.

VI) Anything posted on social media might not be deleted completely and may persist in the form of cached data or saved or forwarded files. The content you post may be discoverable even after you delete it.

Professional communication on social media

All written and visual communication on the professional handles should be rational, truthful, respectful and professional.

a. Abiding by law of the land

i) As per Indian law, doctors are prohibited from advertising any products in their professional capacity. Hence, paid promotions and unpaid promotions of any product or procedure on social media platforms are both out of bounds for dermatologists.

ii) Treatment dispensed over social media is considered illegal as the content creator is unable to evaluate patients over these platforms. Therefore, mentioning any drugs including over the counter medications should be avoided.

If a patient approaches doctors through public social media, the doctor should guide the patient toward a telemedicine consultation or an in-person consultation as the situation warrants.

iii) The boundaries between public education and promotional activities may be blurry at times; IADVL members are advised to use their discretion to decide the boundary. Educational posts that speak about classes of drugs/ procedures or guidelines and / principles in treating specific disease conditions are encouraged.

Any awareness about lifestyle modifications that would aid well-being of dermatology parents are welcome. Any content that would dispel misgivings or myths that are commonly believed is appreciated.

Suggest strongly that it is an advantage to get advice from a qualified dermatologist. And define the term. Do not use the term 'cosmetologist' to describe yourself. ***One may use the description "cosmetic/aesthetic/procedural dermatologist".***

iv) Procedural videos should be made keeping in mind the risk of being mimicked by untrained people. They should be preferably brief and carry disclaimers advising those watching against simulating the procedure unless they possess requisite qualifications and are adequately trained.

v) Soliciting patients and advertising discounts on any medium (social/traditional) is forbidden as per Indian law

vi) IADVL members are advised to refrain from paying for likes and followers to avoid being reprimanded by the NMC.

vii) Taking informed consent regarding sharing patient photographs and/videos on social media is mandatory. Maintaining patient privacy is imperative even after consent is taken. Appropriate masking of eyes and lips and distinct identification marks such as tattoos, birthmarks and jewellery should be ensured.

viii) Stick to stating science and areas of expertise. The information shared should not be misleading or deceptive, nor should it exploit the patient's vulnerability or lack of knowledge

While talking about matters unrelated to core area of expertise on the professional handle, a disclaimer is warranted.

ix) Do not shy away from talking about skin care and hair care in a scientific manner. Do mention ingredients but also the possible adverse events and precautions of the same. Frequently add the disclaimer that an in person consult with a qualified dermatologist is the best way of getting a bespoke skin/hair regimen.

x) Declare any real or potential conflict of interest

xi) Handling negative online reviews: Avoid breaching patient confidentiality while engaging in the conversation. Maintain a polite tone in the conversation. If false allegations are made, mention the same while stating a physician does not reveal sensitive information that would

lead to breach of patient confidentiality. And report the same to the platform administrator and get them to block the person and/delete the comments.

b) Using social media for advocacy

i) Declare whether you are speaking on your own behalf or on behalf of an association.

ii) Declare conflicts of interest.

iii) Avoid unproductive/inflammatory comments

iv) Use your professional clout to create positive change in the society

Punitive measures

Guidelines are meaningless unless they are respected and followed in letter and spirit.
To ensure that the aims of creating these guidelines are met, the following steps shall be implemented.

i) Complaints regarding non-adherence to guidelines may be sent to IADVL ethics committee/ IADVL executive committee.

ii) An explanation and retraction of the said post shall be called for by the committee if deemed fit after discussion by the core committee (comprised of the chairperson, convener and advisor) within a week of the email communication.

iii) In case of failure to comply with the suggested remedial measure within a reasonable period after a reminder (1 weeks after the reminder), IADVL membership of the said member shall be suspended till the retraction is made.

iv) In case of repeat offenders (at least three instances), IADVL membership of the person indulging in unethical practices shall be suspended for a period of one year during which period the member shall not hold any

elected/appointed IADVL posts. He or she invited shall not be invited as a faculty member in any IADVL conference/CME/workshop.

The reinstatement after a period of one year would be done only after an undertaking stated that such behaviour that led to the suspension would not be repeated.

v) In case of grave offences such as providing training to unqualified people/ paid sponsorships for social media posts/ influencing other dermatologists to breach code of ethics, the IADVL lifetime membership person may be cancelled. The same shall be communicated to the concerned state medical council/NMC for appropriate action.

vi) NMC code of ethics states that "a physician should expose, without fear or favour, incompetent or corrupt, dishonest or unethical conduct on the part of members of the profession." Other physicians/dentists who breach these ethics guidelines should be reported to the respective state medical/dental councils. Respective state IADVL EC and ethics committee shall follow up the complaint to ensure appropriate action. In case of non-doctors, the complaint shall be made to the platform administrator.

These guidelines have been created with the sole purpose of empowering dermatologists and helping lay public access accurate information from authentic people on social media. The basis for these guidelines, the relevant portion of the notification of **IMC (Professional Conduct, Etiquette and Ethics) 2002 , is quoted below.** Curbing the freedom of Indian dermatologists while quacks are unfettered by ethics in the usage of social media is not the intention.

6. UNETHICAL ACTS: *A physician shall not aid or abet or commit any of the following acts which shall be construed as unethical—*

6.1 Advertising:

6.1.1. *Soliciting of patients directly or indirectly, by a physician, by a group of physicians or by institutions or organisations is unethical. A physician*

shall not make use of him/her (or his/her name) as subject of any form or manner of advertising or publicity through any mode either alone or in conjunction with others which is of such a character as to invite attention to him or to his professional position, skill, qualification, achievements, attainments, specialities, appointments, associations, affiliations or honours and/or of such character as would ordinarily result in his self-aggrandisement. A physician shall not give to any person, whether for compensation or otherwise, any approval, recommendation, endorsement, certificate, report or statement with respect of any drug, medicine, nostrum remedy, surgical, or therapeutic article, apparatus or appliance or any commercial product or article with respect of any property, quality or use thereof or any test, demonstration or trial thereof, for use in connection with his name, signature, or photograph in any form or manner of advertising through any mode nor shall he boast of cases, operations, cures or remedies or permit the publication of report thereof through any mode. A medical practitioner is however permitted to make a formal announcement in press regarding the following:

(1) On starting practice.

(2) On change of type of practice.

(3) On changing address.

(4) On temporary absence from duty.

(5) On resumption of another practice.

(6) On succeeding to another practice.

(7) Public declaration of charges.

***7. MISCONDUCT**: The following acts of commission or omission on the part of a physician shall constitute*

professional misconduct rendering him/her liable for disciplinary action

***7.1 Violation of the Regulations**: If he/she commits any violation of these Regulations.*

***7.14** The registered medical practitioner shall not disclose the secrets of a patient that have been learnt in the exercise of his / her profession except*

i) in a court of law under orders of the Presiding Judge;

ii) in circumstances where there is a serious and identified risk to a specific person and / or community;

and

iii) notifiable diseases.