



The legislative mandate of the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta (CLPNA) is to serve and protect the public by ensuring its members deliver safe, competent and ethical nursing care. Practice guidelines provide guidance in a particular aspect of clinical care provision that enables Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) to make informed decisions based on the best available evidence. These guidelines support nursing judgment and help LPNs meet expectations of professional behaviour and requirements for practice as set out in legislation, regulation, Standards of Practice, Code of Ethics, and Practice Policies.

<i>This document is linked to legislation:</i>	Health Professions Act	Licensed Practical Nurses Profession Regulation	
<i>This document is linked to other documents that direct expectations of professional behavior and requirements for practice:</i>	Standards of Practice	Code of Ethics	
<i>This document is linked to related supportive documents:</i>	Confidentiality		

KEY WORDS: LPN, licensed practical nurse, privacy, professionalism, social media, therapeutic boundaries

INTRODUCTION Use of social media is being increasingly recognized as an emerging source of regulatory misconduct. This Practice Guideline provides members of the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta (CLPNA) with a guide to responsible use of personal social media accounts, laying out the minimum expectations of conduct for licensed practical nurses (LPNs) using social media.

PURPOSE The purpose of this practice guideline is to support licensed practical nurses (LPNs) in making informed decisions and maintaining professionalism while using social media.

CURRENT EVIDENCE TO INFORM PRACTICE Between smartphones, tablets, computers and other digital devices, the opportunity to use social media is almost constantly at our fingertips.

In many cases social media is used as a way to maintain contact and receive updates from people in our personal lives, but social media can also be used as a way to connect professionally with organizations and colleagues. Because social media can be used for these various purposes, it can be difficult to separate the boundaries between one's personal and professional lives.²

◆ **What Can Go Wrong?**

Some of the main issues that arise with the use of personal social media accounts involve (1) maintaining therapeutic boundaries, (2) upholding privacy and confidentiality, (3) keeping a professional image, and (4) practicing the duty to report.³

Take a Minute to Think Before Posting
How much of your life do you really want to share with your clients, colleagues, or current and future employers?

The following examples are used to highlight the context in which these issues may arise. The strategies linked to each example are intended to encourage professionalism and online best practice for the LPN using personal social media accounts.^{2,4,5,6}

(1) Maintaining Therapeutic Boundaries

(1) Maintaining professional boundaries is a foundational component of a therapeutic nurse-client relationship. Inappropriate use of social media may jeopardize the LPN's ability to preserve the trust and respect required for such a relationship. Consider the impact of the following example:

As an LPN in long-term care, Julia regularly attends the monthly birthday celebrations for clients at the facility where she works. When the grandchild of one of her favorite clients asks Julia to take a photo with their grandmother, she agrees and offers to take it using the camera on her smartphone. Later, Julia posts the photo on Facebook, with a caption about how fun the celebration was. She then asks to befriend her client's grandchild so she can tag them in the photo.

In this example the therapeutic boundaries of a nurse-client relationship are compromised in two ways:



- 1) It is not appropriate for LPNs to take and store photos of clients in care on their personal devices; and
- 2) The act of befriending a client's family member on social media goes beyond what is considered professionally appropriate.

Having a social media connection with a client or a client's family member can blur the line between a professional and personal relationship. For example, the befriended client or family member may start seeking health advice from the LPN through social media. Responding to such requests via a personal social media account post is an unprofessional way to provide nursing and/or supportive services.

Strategies for Maintaining Therapeutic Boundaries

- ✓ Do not provide professional health-related advice via social media;
- ✓ Avoid requesting or accepting friend/follower requests from clients or their extended family; and
- ✓ Avoid revealing personal contact information to clients or their extended family;

In smaller communities and rural areas where everyone may be known to one another it may be especially difficult to avoid interacting with potential clients and their family members over social media. However, the LPN should avoid accepting or requesting social media connections from clients who the LPN has met in care and established a therapeutic nurse-client relationship with.

(2) Upholding Privacy & Confidentiality

Upholding privacy and confidentiality is another significant element of a therapeutic nurse-client relationship. Knowing that one's information will be respected and safeguarded can help ensure a client feels comfortable discussing their health information with their healthcare provider(s).⁶ Safeguarding a client's privacy and confidentiality underpins the LPN's legal and ethical obligations to their client.

Consider the above example where the LPN befriended a client's grandchild on Facebook. Posting the photo online and disclosing the client's location on social media could be considered a breach of the client's privacy. In some cases disclosing this information may also pose a safety risk to the client. ✓

Additionally, if the LPN responds to a comment from the grandchild asking about their grandmother's condition, the LPN may be seen to be breaching the grandmother's privacy

by publicly sharing her confidential health information. LPNs are required to comply with applicable privacy legislation and the CLPNA's Code of Ethics (Section 2.3). Client information must only be collected, used and disclosed through channels aligned with privacy legislation and employer and/or agency policy.

Strategies for Upholding Privacy & Confidentiality

- ✓ Do not post or share a client's health or personal information on social media;
- ✓ Do not share media (images, video, sound clips) from care environments;
- ✓ Avoid revealing place of employment on social media accounts intended for personal use as doing so may pose a personal risk;
- ✓ Enhance privacy settings on social media accounts and keep personal profile(s) private and protected with a strong password.

(2) (3) Keeping a Professional Image

As regulated health professionals, LPNs are expected to maintain a professional reputation in all aspects of their lives. Using social media as an outlet to complain about a difficult manager, or post inappropriate comments or pictures on personal accounts puts the LPN at risk of damaging their professional image, as well as the image of the LPN profession as a whole. Such actions may negatively impact the LPN's relationship with their employer as well as the respect required by clients to build and maintain a therapeutic nurse-client relationship.

Although social media can be a beneficial way of expressing feelings or seeking support, there have also been situations where health professionals were sanctioned because of their inappropriate social media actions. While the nature of the sanctions can vary and is dependent on the specific facts in each situation, the fact that cases like this exist highlights the importance of staying professional while using social media. Maintaining one's professionalism becomes even more important when one's online communications make it obvious the individual is an LPN or other professional.

Strategies for Keeping a Professional Image

- Do not use social media to degrade or vent about a client, co-worker, employer or the health system;
- ✓ Do not post, like, or comment on posts that could be considered inappropriate or misunderstood if taken out of context;
- ✓ Always present yourself in a professional manner; and



- ✓ Be aware and follow employer policies on the use of technology and social media in and out of the workplace.

(4) Practicing the Duty to Report

The Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada creates a duty to report the actions of others if the LPN becomes aware of unethical or incompetent care.⁷ If another health professional, client or family member shares a story about unethical or incompetent care over social media, this ethical obligation means an LPN reading the post should report the behaviour to the appropriate regulatory authority. Consider the following example:

Sarah, an LPN, is sitting in a local coffee shop where the message board asks customers to tweet why they are thankful it's Friday to @coffeetalk. Curious to see what other customers have said Sarah checks the Twitter feed and sees a tweet from @StarLPN saying "@coffeetalk it's been a short-staffed week at #valleyhospital and for the last two days I've been too tired to give my clients their afternoon meds #tgif #Friyay."

Sarah works at Valley Hospital and knows her colleague is @StarLPN. The tweet clearly says that unethical and incompetent care has been happening in her facility. Failing to report her colleague's behaviour to the CLPNA would be a breach of Sarah's professional obligation to the public and the CLPNA.

Strategies for Practicing the Duty to Report

- ✓ Report incompetent or unethical conduct of oneself and others to the CLPNA and employer as applicable (Code of Ethics s 2.5).

◆ The LPN's Obligations to Stay Professional on Social Media

In using social media LPNs are responsible for the content of their posts. It is important that the LPN is aware that comments made on social media platforms are potentially as public as if they were made directly to the media or at a public forum.

Mishandling social media puts the LPN at risk of disciplinary action by the CLPNA, their employer, and the law. Therefore, while using social media LPNs must uphold legal and regulatory expectations related to privacy, professional ethics and boundaries.

Section W of the Competency Profile for LPNs, 3rd Edition indicates the LPN is expected to:

- demonstrate knowledge and ability to apply ethical principles to decision-making including use of technology/social media;
- demonstrate knowledge and ability to recognize and maintain appropriate boundaries related to social media interactions; and
- demonstrate knowledge of risks associated with improper use of social media including
 - breach of privacy/confidentiality
 - compromise public safety/trust in nurses
 - undermine individual nursing careers
 - inappropriate use during work hours.⁸

Inappropriate use of personal social media accounts may also lead to findings of unprofessional conduct, since it may constitute conduct that harms the integrity of the profession, or breaches the Code of Ethics. The Code of Ethics for Licensed Practical Nurses in Canada which has been adopted by the CLPNA states the LPN must:

- respect and protect client privacy and hold in confidence information disclosed except in certain narrowly defined exceptions; which includes
 - maintaining professional boundaries in the use of electronic media.⁷

Principle 4 of the Code also sets out that LPNs have a responsibility to develop and maintain positive, collaborative relationships with nursing colleagues and other health professionals.

Further, the Standards of Practice state that the LPN must:

- practice within the relevant laws governing privacy & confidentiality of personal health information; and
- maintain professional boundaries in the nurse/client therapeutic relationships at all times.⁹

The LPN also has a legal obligation to adhere to relevant legislation governing clients' privacy and confidentiality, including the *Health Information Act*, *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the *Personal Information Protection Act*. While the specifically applicable privacy legislation will depend on the LPN's practice setting, the guiding legal principles protecting clients are similar.

The above professional and legal obligations may apply to the LPN at work, at home, and everywhere in between. Social media accounts maybe interpreted as a reflection of one's personal and professional self. So take a minute



to think before posting. How much of your life do you want to share with your clients, colleagues, current and future employers?

Privacy settings between accounts and platforms vary. Even the highest setting may not be 100% secure. This means posts and comments could be accessible by more people than you think (i.e. curious clients or a potential

employer), and for longer than anticipated. Even a deleted post might be recoverable.²

If after reading this document you have questions about the appropriate use of social media, please contact a CLPNA Practice Consultant at practice@clpna.com, 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll free in Alberta)

Practice Checklist

The LPN should

- ✓ Not offer health-related advice in response to questions and comments on social media and instead refer information seekers to the appropriate health care access point;
- ✓ Avoid accepting/requesting friend/follower requests from clients and their family members;
- ✓ Avoid revealing personal contact information to clients;
- ✓ Not post confidential and/or identifying information about clients on social media;
- ✓ Not share media (images, video, sound clips) from care environments;
- ✓ Avoid revealing place of employment on social media accounts intended for personal use;
- ✓ Enhance privacy settings and keep personal account(s) private and protected with a strong password;
- ✓ Not use social media to degrade, vent or share negative information about a client, co-worker or employer;
- ✓ Not post, like, or comment on posts that could be considered inappropriate or misunderstood if taken out of context;
- ✓ Always present oneself in a professional manner;
- ✓ Be aware of and follow employer policies on the use of technology and social media in and out of the workplace; and
- ✓ Follow a professional responsibility to report incompetent or unethical conduct of themselves and others.



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