PRINCIPLE VII:
ADVERTISING

Advertising is intended to inform and educate the public about available social work and social service work services. College members ensure that advertisements are compatible with the standards and ethics of the social work and social service work professions.

Interpretation

7.1 College members may advertise their services through public statements, announcements, advertising media and promotional activities provided that these:

7.1.1 are not false or misleading, and that any factual information is verifiable;

7.1.2 do not bring the professions or College into disrepute;

7.1.3 do not compare services with other College members;

7.1.4 do not include any endorsements or testimonials;

7.1.5 do not display any affiliation with an organization or association in a manner that falsely implies that organization's sponsorship or certification;

7.1.6 do not claim uniqueness or special advantage unsupported by professional or scientific evidence; and

7.1.7 are in keeping with standards of good taste and discretion.

7.2 College members may advertise fees charged for their services provided that advertised fees clearly relate to proposed services and include disclosure of possible limits, uncertainties or circumstances whereby additional fees may be charged. (See also Principle VI: Fees.)

7.3 College members' education, training, and experience, as well as areas of competence, professional affiliations and services are described in an honest and accurate manner.[1,1.1,2]

7.3.1 College members may represent themselves as specialists in certain areas of practice only if they can provide evidence of specialized training, extensive experience or education;

7.3.2 College members do not make false, misleading or exaggerated claims of efficacy regarding past or anticipated achievements with respect to clients, scholarly pursuits or contributions to society.

7.3.3 College members correct, whenever possible, false, misleading or inaccurate information and representations made by others concerning College members' qualifications or services.

7.4 College members do not solicit prospective clients in ways that are misleading, that disadvantage fellow members or that discredit the professions of social work or social service work.

FOOTNOTES

1. The following alternatives are acceptable forms for individual vocational designation on business cards, letterhead stationery, forms, business telephone listings, directories, signs and identification of business premises, etc.:

a) College members who are social workers identify themselves by using the designation "RSW", or one of the titles "Social Worker" or "Registered Social Worker", following their names. College members who are social service workers identify themselves by using the designation "RSSW", or one of the titles "Social Service Worker" or "Registered Social Service Worker", following their names. College members may add an optional one line description of the College member's area of limited practice or specialty; or

b) "RSW", "Social Worker" or "Registered Social Worker", in the case of a social worker, or "RSSW", "Social Service Worker" or "Registered Social Service Worker", in the case of a social service worker, following the highest academic degree or diploma;

b.1) where a College member is an inactive member under the Registration Regulation (Ontario Regulation 383/00), the member must use "inactive" in English or "inactif" in French immediately following "RSW", "Social Worker" or "Registered Social Worker", in the case of a social worker, or "RSSW", "Social Service Worker" or "Registered Social Service Worker", in the case of a social service worker, and the member must not engage in the practice of social work or social service work, as the case may be, in Ontario.

c) where a College member holds an earned doctorate in social work, as defined in subsection 47.3(2) of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998,* the member may use either, but not both, of i) or ii) as follows:

i) the degree in addition to the designation or title in either of clauses a) or b); or

ii) the title "Doctor" or "Dr.", as a prefix, provided that it is followed by the member's full name, and immediately followed by one of (A), (B) or (C), as follows:

(A) Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers together with RSW, in the case of a social worker, or RSSW, in the case of a social service worker,
(B) social worker or registered social worker, or

(C) social service worker or registered social service worker; or

c.1) where a College member does not hold an earned doctorate in social work, as defined in subsection 47.3(2) of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998,* but does hold a doctoral degree, the member may use either, but not both, of i) or ii) as follows:

i) the degree, in addition to the designation or title in either of clauses a) or b); or
ii) the title "Doctor" or "Dr.", as a prefix, in addition to the designation or title in either of clauses a) or b),

provided that the member may not use the title "Doctor", a variation or abbreviation or an equivalent in another language in the course of providing or offering to provide, in Ontario, health care to individuals; or

d) where the College member is a consultant or advisor in the public or private sector, the phrase "Consultant in . . ." or "Advisor in . . ." , when contained in professional materials, is used only in connection with such position and as an addition to the designation in either clauses a) or b); and

e) where the College member is an employee in the public or private sector, such affiliation with an accurate and appropriate indication of rank, title or nature of function may be displayed on a professional card and used only in connection with such employment in addition to the designation in clauses a) or b).

1.1 "Earned doctorate" means a doctoral degree in social work that is,

(a) granted by a post-secondary educational institution authorized in Ontario to grant the degree under an Act of the Assembly, including a person that is authorized to grant the degree pursuant to the consent of the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities under the *Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000,*
(b) granted by a post-secondary educational institution in a Canadian province or territory other than Ontario and that is considered by the College to be equivalent to a doctoral degree described in clause (a), or
(c) granted by a post-secondary educational institution located in a country other than Canada that is considered by the College to be equivalent to a doctoral degree described in clause (a). (Subsection 47.3(2) of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*).

Members are referred to the College's "Policy respecting Earned Doctorates in Social Work under subsection 47.3(2) of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998".* This Policy describes the criteria that the College uses to determine whether a member holds an earned doctorate in social work, as defined in subsection 47.3(2) of the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*.

2. College members practising the profession of social work or social service work through a business, partnership or professional corporation may use one of the following acceptable alternatives as applicable:

a) a list of the names of the partners, with College members designated as in Footnote 1;
b) a partnership title containing:
   i) the surnames or full names of two or more actual partners; or
   ii) where there are three or more actual partners, the surnames or full names may be used with the term "and Associate" or "and Associates" as appropriate;

c) a partnership title as above with an individual listing of the College members' names and acceptable vocational designations (see Footnote 1);"
d) where an unincorporated business, the business name with an individual listing of the College members' names and acceptable vocational designations (see Footnote 1);
e) where a professional corporation, the corporate name of the professional corporation;
f) where a professional corporation, the corporate name of the professional corporation with an individual listing of the names of the College members who are shareholders and acceptable vocational designations (see Footnote 1);
g) where a professional corporation has a practice name other than its corporate name, the practice name together with the corporate name of the professional corporation; and
h) where a professional corporation has a practice name other than its corporate name, the practice name together with the corporate name of the professional corporation and an individual listing of the names of the College members who are shareholders and acceptable vocational designations (see Footnote 1).

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Practice Notes:

Communication Technology & Ethical Practice: Evolving Issues in a Changing Landscape

Lise Betteridge, M.S.W., RSW, Director of Professional Practice

Practice Notes is designed as an educational tool to help Ontario social workers, social service workers, employers and members of the public gain a better understanding of recurring issues dealt with by the professional practice department and the Complaints Committee that may affect everyday practice. The notes offer general guidance only and members with specific practice inquiries should consult the College, since the relevant standards and appropriate course of action will vary depending on the situation.

New communication technologies create significant opportunities for social workers and social service workers. They enable professionals to share information and to network, and they facilitate communication for administrative, research, educational and/or clinical purposes. At the same time, the ease and immediacy of these technologies pose some significant risks and challenges for members and their clients. Social workers and social service workers should ensure that they are technologically aware and competent, as their clients are likely to have embraced technology in step with the general population. Those practising with certain client groups (youth in particular) find themselves working with clients who are "digital natives" and have never known a world without the Internet. Many clients may therefore expect that their social worker or social service worker will communicate with them using technology such as e-mail, text messaging, Skype, Facebook or other social media.

Some members have begun to use these new technologies in their practice, either as the primary modality for the therapeutic work (in cyber counselling or e-counselling, for example) or solely for administrative purposes, to support their face-to-face clinical work with clients. In some instances, members may be practising in the absence of complete information about the technology or knowledge of best practices. They may also be working in the absence of agency policies or other specific guidelines.

The incremental adoption of new technologies with clients, without careful consideration of the potential risks and issues involved, has been referred to as a "slippery slope"[1] and can result in harm to clients as well as risk for members. This article addresses some of the questions raised in practice calls to the Professional Practice Department. It addresses the use of e-mail and text messaging in communication with clients, the documentation related to this practice, and the advisability of developing a social media policy. The discussion is limited to the use of communication technologies as an adjunct to face-to-face work with clients, rather than as the primary mode of contact or intervention. Members are encouraged to review *Social Media and Practice: Protecting Privacy and Professionalism in a Virtual World*, Practice Notes which are available in the Resource Room on the College website www.ocswssw.org, for a discussion specific to social media and practice.

COMMUNICATING VIA TEXT MESSAGE OR E-MAIL

Some members have considered using text messaging or e-mail with clients in an effort to be more client centred and responsive, and because they find this mode of communication to be more administratively efficient. Consider the following scenario:

> A member working in the school system contacted the Professional Practice Department because several of his clients had been texting him to book or change appointments. He also described one situation in which a client had texted him in the midst of a crisis. The member wanted to ensure that he was practising in accordance with College standards of practice when using these forms of communication with clients. He was also seeking guidance as to how he should document the interactions. The member said that most of his clients (who were high school students) used text messaging as their primary form of communication, and he found it increasingly difficult to reach them by phone as he had done in the past. He explained that some of his colleagues were strongly opposed to his use of text messaging with clients, but many used e-mail with some ambivalence.

Although members in a variety of settings may feel growing pressure from clients to use text messaging to communicate about administrative and other matters, those working with youth may feel this pressure most strongly. In the scenario above, the member would be wise to discuss his current practice and his concerns with his supervisor if

he hasn't done so already. The member must follow school board policy regarding such issues, but "(i)f there is a conflict between College standards of practice and a College member's work environment" the member's obligation is to the standards of practice.[2] College members employed by organizations must "maintain an awareness and consideration of the purpose, mandate and function of those organizations and how these impact on and limit professional relationships with clients".[3] Additionally, College members employed by an organization should "... acquire and maintain a thorough understanding of the organization policies and practices relating to the management of client information ..." so that they are fully aware of "... when, how and the purposes for which the organization routinely collects, uses, modifies, discloses, retains or disposes of information".[4]

Text messaging (and sometimes e-mail, to a lesser degree) is an inherently casual form of communication. If members use text messaging with clients, they should carefully consider the tone of the language they use in texts or e-mails, as well as the timing of their responses and the locations from which they reply. What are clients' expectations regarding the immediacy of responses? Does this differ from their expectations with respect to phone calls? Does the client expect, as they might in their personal communication, that the member will be available to respond to texts at all times, or outside of regular working hours? Has the member considered the possible implications of a delay in responding to texts or e-mails from clients? What are the member's obligations if a client in crisis communicates via text or e-mail? Members should "provide clients with accurate and complete information regarding the extent, nature, and limitations of any services available to them".[5] This discussion should include an explanation of how and when the member will use and respond to different forms of electronic communication.

Because text messages (and perhaps e-mails) are received on mobile devices, members may find themselves responding to clients outside their physical office/work setting. Members should consider whether by responding from different locations (home, transit, in the company of others, while on vacation, for example) they are setting up expectations on the part of the client for an immediate, even 24-hour, response. This may be a concern even if the client is not aware that the member is not in the office/work setting when responding. Member should be cautious about the potential for blurring of boundaries in these situations, and should be aware that they must at all times "establish and maintain clear and appropriate boundaries in professional relationships for the protection of clients".[6]

The use of text messaging and e-mail may also compromise clients' confidentiality and privacy.[7] Neither form of communication is completely secure. Is the member using a personal device or one which belongs to their employer? If it is a personal device, have they considered the implications of sharing client information in this way? If they are using a mobile device in a situation where they might previously have used a landline, is there a greater likelihood of the device being lost or stolen, thereby compromising clients' confidentiality? What kind of security are they using on their device, and has the member taken appropriate measures to protect their clients' privacy through passwords, encryption or other means? Members must ensure that they "comply with any applicable privacy and other legislation".[8] They are strongly advised to review and follow any recommendations/ advisories from the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner which are applicable to the member's workplace[9] and/or to consult with the privacy officer in their organization (if any) regarding such measures. Members must be guided at all times by the knowledge that they are obliged to "(hold) in strict confidence all information about clients"[10] and "inform clients early in their relationship of the limits of confidentiality of information".[11]

In addition to considering their own responsibility to maintain clients' confidentiality, members should ensure that they discuss these considerations with their clients. It is possible that clients have not given thought to these issues, particularly with respect to the potential sensitivity of their involvement with the member. The member may therefore wish to discuss whether others have access to the client's mobile phone, computer or other device. It may also be advisable to ask whether the client is using location-based services such as Foursquare to enable others to follow them through their mobile devices. If so, has the client considered the possible ramifications of this when they are attending an appointment with the member?[12]

DOCUMENTATION

Members may choose to limit their use of text messaging and e-mail to managing appointments. Even in these circumstances, they must consider whether and how they will retain e-mails or texts as well as how clients will be informed of these decisions. Members must "document services in a recognizable form in order to ensure the continuity and quality of service to establish accountability for and evidence of the services rendered".[13] The tools or data used by the College member in developing a professional opinion may be or need not be included in the record… (but) (o)nce placed in the record… they become an integral part of that record."[14] Members must use their judgment to decide whether it is appropriate to include e-mails or text messages in the record. Although members may intend to limit their use of text or e-mail to administrative matters, clients may not always understand or adhere to this practice. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to include e-mails or text messages in the record. The member should therefore consider whether it is always feasible to limit communication to administrative matters, how they will respond in the event that a client communicates sensitive information via text or e-mail, and how they will handle and document such information.

Members must use their professional judgment to ensure that they "document the client's situation/problem exactly" and include "information that is appropriate and useful to the understanding of the situation and the management of the case".[15] It may be relatively easy to print off an e-mail, but how will the member handle a sensitive text message? Most importantly, is the client aware that the member will include such information in the record? Members must ensure that they "inform clients of foreseeable risks as well as rights, opportunities, and obligations associated with the provision of professional services"[16] and "inform clients early in their relationship of the limits of confidentiality of information",[17] including with respect to the record.

DEVELOPING A SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Members may wish to consider developing a "social media ethics policy" in order to protect their clients and themselves.[18] This policy should address the member's policies and practices with respect to commonly-used forms of electronic communication. The policy should explain the limits of their electronic communication, including when and how often the member will check and respond to texts or e-mails and for what purposes. Unless they are engaged in e-counselling/cybercounselling[19], members should be explicit in their policy that they are limiting their use of text messaging or e-mail to administrative matters such as scheduling appointments, and should highlight the privacy, confidentiality and documentation issues discussed above. A social media policy should also include a discussion of social media and its impact on the social work/social service work relationship.

Members are strongly advised to discuss their social media policy at the outset of their work with clients, as part of the informed consent process. As is the case with any consent, the client's understanding of the matters covered in the consent form is critical: a paper form is not a substitute for a full discussion.

In the scenario described above, the member decided to discuss his use of text messaging with his supervisor, to ensure that he understood the organization's policy and had considered security and documentation issues. He felt that the advantages of text messaging outweighed the potential risks in his setting. He also decided to explore the potential for making the use of communication technology a topic for an upcoming professional development day, and to collaborate with his colleagues on the development of a social media policy.

This article has discussed the challenges and opportunities associated with the adoption of new forms of electronic communication by social workers and social service workers in their practice. Members can ensure that they are practicing ethically and responsibly by giving these issues careful consideration, by ensuring they have the necessary knowledge and skills, by approaching technology-related decisions with appropriate caution, and by ensuring that clients are well informed participants.

For more information, please contact the Professional Practice Department at practice@ocswssw.org

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[1] *Faye Mishna, Marion Bogo, Jennifer Root, Jami-Leigh Sawyer and Mona Khoury-Kassabri "It just crept in": The Digital Age and Implications for Social Work Practice. Clinical Social Work Journal Online Publication February 11, 2012*

[2] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2.10*

[3] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle I: Relationship with Clients, interpretation 1.7*

[4] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition, 2008, Principle V: Confidentiality, Interpretation 5.2*

[5] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle III: Responsibility to Clients, interpretation 3.1*

[6] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2*

[7] *Reamer, Frederic G. Eye on Ethics: Developing a Social Media Ethics Policy. Social Work Today July 1, 2011 retrieved July 9, 2012 from http://www.socialworktoday.com/news/eoe_070111.shtml*

[8] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle V: Confidentiality, interpretation 5.1*

[9] *Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner www.ipc.on.ca*

[10] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle V: Confidentiality*

[11] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle V: Confidentiality, interpretation 5.4*

[12] *Frederic Reamer, keynote address, Association of Social Work Boards Spring Meeting "e-World Ethics: Issues and Implications for Regulatory Boards", April 27, 2012*

[13] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle IV: The Social Work and Social Service Work Record*

[14] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle IV: The Social Work and Social Service Work Record, footnote 1*

[15] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle IV: The Social Work and Social Service Work Record, footnote 2*

[16] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle III: Responsibility to Clients, interpretation*

3.6

[17] Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Second Edition, 2008, Principle V: Confidentiality, interpretation 5.4

[18] Reamer, Eye on Ethics: Developing a Social Media Ethics Policy and keynote address, ASWB Spring Meeting, April 27, 2012

[19] Cyber-counselling is a specialized practice. Members engaging in this form of practice should ensure that they are competent to do so, and that they have considered the relevant ethical, legal, jurisdictional and clinical issues.

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Practice Notes:

Social Media and Practice: Protecting Privacy and Professionalism in a Virtual World

Lise Betteridge, M.S.W., RSW, Director of Professional Practice

Practice Notes is designed as an educational tool to help Ontario social workers, social service workers, employers and members of the public gain a better understanding of recurring issues dealt with by the professional practice department and the Complaints Committee that may affect everyday practice. The notes offer general guidance only and members with specific practice inquiries should consult the College, since the relevant standards and appropriate course of action will vary depending on the situation.

It's difficult these days to avoid almost daily references to social media in the news. As far back as 2006, the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario described social networking sites as "a significant technological and social phenomenon"[1] and experts agree that social media is here to stay. New technology in general, and social media in particular, now influence social workers and social service workers in their practice in ways that would have been inconceivable even a couple of years ago. Because College members work in the social and/or psychosocial realm, and seek to optimize clients' functioning in these areas, it is critical that they have an understanding of the various ways that technology influences clients' lives. Technology and social media are also likely to play an ever-expanding role in the personal and professional lives of members themselves. This article addresses some of the issues which members may wish to consider in the age of Web 2.0 – competence, boundaries, confidentiality and advertising.

COMPETENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Opening a personal Facebook account may seem like a completely personal decision, but the issue may not be that simple. A member called the Professional Practice Department to discuss the following scenario:

> The member, who practised in the school system, had recently opened a personal Facebook account. During the summer while on vacation, the member was contacted on his personal Facebook account by a former client. The member was very concerned about this client's state of mind as well as her isolation over the summer months. Although he had some concerns about contacting the client while he was not at work, the member felt he should try to connect the client to community resources. He did so by responding to the client via Facebook. When he called the College, the member expressed surprise that the client had been able to contact him, and was unaware of the privacy settings that he could use on his account. The member contacted the Professional Practice Department to discuss how to handle similar scenarios in the future.

A growing number of College members have personal Facebook accounts, and this member is no exception. Prior to setting up a personal Facebook account, a member would be wise to become educated about the privacy and security settings available, and to determine the appropriate steps for maintaining professional boundaries. As Principle II: Competence and Integrity in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, 2nd Edition* states, "College members are responsible for being aware of the extent and parameters of their competence ... and (must) limit their practice accordingly."[2] Principle II also requires that "College members establish and maintain clear and appropriate boundaries in professional relationships for the protection of clients."[3]

While it may seem daunting to remain informed in the rapidly-evolving world of technology, it is ultimately the member's professional obligation to do so. The member should be informed about certain aspects of the technology, including how to manage privacy and security settings, before using it. The member should also "... remain current with emerging social work or social service work knowledge and practice relevant to their areas of professional practice."[4]

Despite the fact that the member in the scenario above believed that he was making a personal decision when he

opened his Facebook account, there is a risk that the lines between private and public, work life and personal life may be more easily blurred in the age of social media. It would be prudent for the member to consider the following: what kind of information should he post on his personal Facebook page? Is the information accessible to others outside his closed network of "friends"? How do different social media sites vary in terms of privacy? While Facebook does have extensive privacy and security options, for example, it is far less common for users of Twitter to use available settings. What should he do if and when he is "tagged" in photos on the Facebook pages of his family members or friends? What is his responsibility for this information, and how would he address it?

The member should be aware that online information about him may be in a constant state of flux, may not always be in his control, and may be there forever. It may be advisable for the member to choose privacy settings which disable the tagging feature, so that photos tagged by others cannot be viewed. Without doing so, he might be identified by clients or others doing an online search using his name. This member (and even those members without a Facebook page) could conceivably have an online presence about which they are unaware. An additional risk is that information concerning the member posted by his or her friends or family members on their own Facebook pages may come up in an online search. It is possible that a member might then find him or herself in a situation in which a client has accessed personal information about the member that he or she would not have shared in the professional relationship. It is likely that it would not be appropriate for the client to have this information, and this knowledge may significantly complicate the therapeutic relationship, thereby putting the client at risk.

While members are likely to have an online presence, professional or personal, they would be wise to assume that all the information they post could be viewed by clients, employers and colleagues. Members should also consider whether they have a further responsibility to discuss with family and friends how their online activities may influence the member in his or her professional role. Members should consider that in their practice, they must "... avoid conduct which could reasonably be perceived as reflecting negatively on the professions of social work or social service work."[5]

Members may wish to include a discussion of social media and its impact on the social work/social service work relationship at the outset of their work with clients. This could include discussion as to how they would communicate with clients and when. Principle III: Responsibility to Clients emphasizes that College members must "... provide clients with accurate and complete information regarding the extent, nature, and limitations of any services available to them."[6]

In the scenario above, the member decided to consult with a colleague immediately about how to put strong security and privacy settings on his personal account. He also recognized that he would need to have a discussion with all new and existing clients regarding appropriate forms of communication, with specific reference to e-mail and Facebook. While he was not concerned about any of the content on his Facebook page being inappropriate or in poor taste, his recently-acquired understanding of ways that this information may be accessed made him even more cautious in choosing what to post.

PROTECTING CONFIDENTIALITY

Social media sites such as Twitter, MySpace and Facebook allow users to create a public or semi-public profile and to interact with other users. It is this interaction – the opportunity to post responses - which distinguishes Web 2.0 from the World Wide Web. Members of the College may blog about their professional lives and issues of interest to the profession, or use Twitter to tweet about current concerns. This shift in the use of the internet creates some important opportunities for informing and connecting members of the profession. Caution is warranted, however. Consider the following scenario:

> A member of the College working in a small community wants to start a blog, in which she plans to discuss issues in her area of practice and connect with others practising in similar areas in other communities. The member follows another member on Twitter and feels motivated by the ways in which this medium might facilitate networking and advocacy.

Blogs offer the opportunity for members, regardless of geographic location, to connect with each other, to identify common issues, to share knowledge, and perhaps to advocate around areas of concern. For those practising in more isolated settings, blogs may be an opportunity to become better informed and join in group advocacy. Principle II: Competence and Integrity states that members of the College "... shall advocate for workplace conditions and policies that are consistent with the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice ..." and shall "... use professional judgement in determining how to advocate."[7] In some instances, blogs may be an appropriate part of the advocacy process.

There are, however, potential privacy and confidentiality concerns with respect to blogs. Members should be mindful that any information they post may be viewed far more broadly than they anticipated. As noted previously, once information is posted, it is no longer in the control of the member, and quite possibly cannot be removed. This raises some important questions: is the member planning to blog personally or in her professional role? In either case, is she disclosing information to which others should have access? Is her blog in keeping with the standards of practice and does it reflect the kind of professional image which she would like to promote? Does her employer have a policy on the use of social media, including blogs? How can she ensure that any information she posts does not contain any personal or identifying information with respect to clients, or information that could be used, either alone or with other information, to identify clients?

In considering these questions, Principle V: Confidentiality (in addition to the standards of practice already discussed) is relevant in its entirety. In particular, members must "... comply with any applicable privacy and other legislation ... (and) obtain consent to the collection, use or disclosure of client information..."[8] Those College members employed by an organization should also "... acquire and maintain a thorough understanding of the organization policies and practices relating to the management of client information ..." so that they are fully aware of "... when, how and the purposes for which the organization routinely collects, uses, modifies, discloses, retains or disposes of information".[9] The member in the above scenario must be careful that in her blog she does not inadvertently "... disclose the identity of and/or information about a person who has consulted or retained (her) ... unless the person consents,"[10] or provide information which could be used, either alone or with other information, to identify clients or others without their consent.

The member should also consider how a client, colleague or her employer reading her blog may react to the information. Would they potentially recognize themselves in it, even if they aren't named? In addition, it may be a breach of confidentiality to include any information pertaining to her employer and to practices within the organization, as well as any information about her team.

Members should be aware that with regard to confidentiality, publishing information on a blog is in some respects no different from publishing information in another format (although it may have broader circulation than other forms of publication). An additional challenge with blogs is that there are few if any checks and balances to enable a member to pause, take stock and use professional judgment before hitting "publish".

A FINAL CAUTION: THE USE OF TESTIMONIALS

"Comment" sections on websites are now a common feature; as members of the public, we may increasingly come to expect this opportunity to give feedback. As the organizations in which members are employed and members in private practice themselves consider adding this feature to their websites, members must consider the potential risks involved in posting or including comments – which may be considered testimonials in some circumstances – from clients and others. Consider the following:

> A member of the College decided to post her profile on LinkedIn. She received a notification that her profile was only 80% complete, and could be improved if she were to seek out "recommendations" from others. While the member could see the benefit of completing her profile according to the site's recommendations, she had some concerns about who would view these recommendations, and whether this would be acceptable from the College perspective.

Principle VII: Advertising states that members may advertise their services through "... public statements, announcements, advertising media and promotional activities" as long as these "... do not include any endorsements or testimonials".[11] Despite their effectiveness as promotional tools, testimonials are not permitted according to the Standards of Practice. Testimonials may create a kind of dual relationship in which clients come to believe that they have a different relationship with the member as a result of the endorsement that they have provided. Members must "... distinguish their needs and interests from those of their clients to ensure that, within professional relationships, clients' needs and interests remain paramount."[12]

Testimonials tend to be associated with private businesses whose goal is to sell a product or service, rather than with professional services. Furthermore, testimonials may not assist individuals in making good choices about the professional with whom they wish to work.

Members should consider whether the "recommendations" on LinkedIn or other online comments could be considered testimonials. They may also wish to consider who will be viewing the comments, and for what purpose. From a public protection perspective, the loss of control of information once it is posted online is one of the most significant challenges posed by the use of social media.

Members must use their knowledge and their professional judgement to consider the potential risks and how to address them.

This article has discussed some of the professional and ethical issues raised by social media. As this technology continues to evolve and influence our lives and practice, members will need to ensure they are sufficiently informed to use it competently and appropriately, in the best interests of their clients.

For more information about this or other practice issues, please contact the Professional Practice Department at practice@ocswssw.org

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[1] *"Think about your privacy when selecting a social networking site", News Release, October 12, 2006, Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner www.ipc.on.ca.*

[2] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle II, Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.1.1*

[3] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle II, Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2*

[4] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle II, Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.1.2*

[5] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle II, Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2.8*

[6] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle III, Responsibility to Clients, interpretation 3.1*

[7] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle II, Competence and Integrity, Footnote 10*

[8] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle V, Confidentiality, Interpretation 5.1*

[9] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle V, Confidentiality, Interpretation 5.2*

[10] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle V, Confidentiality, Interpretation 5.3.6*

[11] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle VII, Advertising, Interpretation 7.1.4*

[12] *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, Second Edition 2008, Principle I, Relationship with Clients, Interpretation 1.6*