

Consensus Statement: **Social Media**

The New Zealand College of Midwives | Te Kāreti o Ngā Kaiwhakawhānau ki Aotearoa considers all midwives and midwifery students should maintain professional standards and ensure professionalism in all on-line postings, sharing and other on-line activity.

Definition:

Social media refers to platforms by which information and ideas can be created and shared using online networks and virtual communities¹. Social media consists of the internet or web-based technologies that allow people to connect and communicate in real time to share information e.g facebook, Twitter, Tiktok, YouTube, Snapchat, Instagram, blogs, forums and personal websites.

Rationale:

Social networking sites can be helpful for midwives and midwifery students by;

- developing and maintaining professional connections
- establishing or accessing midwifery support networks and being able to discuss, for example, specific issues, interests and research with colleagues and other health professionals and
- being able to access resources for professional development.

The purpose of this document is to support midwives and midwifery students to maintain their professionalism, professional boundaries and ensure cultural safety when using social media.

Practice Guidance:

- Protect your professionalism and your reputation. It is important that midwives maintain their integrity as midwives and members of the profession; social media does not differentiate between personal and professional posts when midwives are identifiable².
- It is paramount that the privacy of clients and colleagues is protected at all times. Women, wāhine, people and whānau may share their health issues and accounts openly on their own social sites but midwives as health professionals are required to maintain confidentiality and should not share clients' information without their permission. This includes anonymous reference to practice experiences or cases³
- Midwives are advised not to provide individual clinical advice through any social media sites. Where midwives receive contact via social media, they are advised to respond by direct messaging or phone instead.
- Inappropriate use of social media can result in harm to clients, colleagues and the profession, particularly given the ability for material to be re-posted by others.
- Harm may include breaches of confidentiality, defamation of colleagues or employers, violation of practitioner–client boundaries or an unintended exposure of personal information to the public, employers, consumers and others.
- New Zealand has legislation, The Harmful Digital Communications Act 2015 (HDCA), which provides protection for New Zealand Internet users against harmful content online. Communications that breach its communication principles (see below) and cause individuals' emotional distress could result in civil court action or even in some cases criminal proceedings against those that post content online⁴.
- The HDCA communications principle 10 highlights a list (drawn from the NZ Bill of Rights) which describe the infringement of an individual's rights. "A digital communication should not

denigrate an individual by reason of his or her colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability”⁴.

- The use of social media platforms has altered expectations of what is ‘public’ and what is ‘private’. This affects the way in which online aspects of private lives are accessible to others. Any information shared may be permanently available; even if it is quickly deleted it may have already been copied or may be retrievable.
- The practice of cultural safety applies to collegial relationships as much as to the midwifery partnership with birthing women/wāhine/people and whānau⁶. When using social media, midwives are expected to be regardful of the diverse identities and lived experiences of other users of the platform.
- Culturally safe and mana-enhancing social media use is supported by curiosity and an attempt to understand other points of view. Mana-enhancing communication involves adherence to the principles of respect, integrity and dignity to support the wellbeing of others in the communication⁷.

Using social media responsibly

You can meet your obligations by:

- Maintaining confidentiality and privacy obligations
- Complying with professional standards and Code of Ethics and the Regulatory Authority’s Code of Conduct^{2,3}.
- Maintaining professional boundaries
- Communicating professionally and respectfully with clients and their whānau, colleagues and employers
- Not presenting information that is false or misleading. Practitioners need to take care when commenting, sharing or ‘liking’ such content if not supported by robust evidence^{8,9}.
- Being informed and familiarising yourself with how individual social media applications work. Check your privacy settings for each platform you use. Always consider the (whole) audience who may potentially be colleagues, friends of friends or friends of clients or potential clients¹⁰
- Being aware of the HDCA 2015 s6 10 principles that apply to texts, emails and online posts⁴. The principles identify that any digital communications sent to you, by you or are about you shouldn’t;
 1. give out sensitive personal information about you
 2. be threatening, intimidating or menacing
 3. be grossly offensive, as judged by any reasonable person in your position
 4. be indecent or obscene
 5. be used to harass you
 6. make false claims about you
 7. contain information or material that you had given to someone in confidence
 8. encourage other people to send you a message for the purpose of causing you harm
 9. encourage you to kill yourself
 10. put you down (“denigrate” you) on the basis of your colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability.
- Minimising risks of social media harm by
 - pausing before posting any comments, ensure the message conveys your meaning before posting
 - ensuring women/wāhine/people have access to formal feedback mechanisms for the profession such as Midwifery Standards Review consumer feedback forms and Resolutions Committees

Managing harmful social media content

- The HDCA 2015, regulations and amendments has set up special processes you can use if you're being harassed or bullied through texts, emails, websites, apps or social media posts⁴. The 'test' applied to determine a breach of the Act are;
 1. That the communications causes harm (serious emotional distress) and
 2. That the communication would cause harm to an ordinary, reasonable person in that persons position
- Where social media commentary is considered to be derogatory, discriminatory or culturally unsafe, participants need to consider the most safe and effective way to address this. This may involve:
 - An approach to the person directly for an off-line conversation if appropriate
 - Notifying social media forum moderators
 - Notifying and seeking further advice from Netsafe
 - Seeking advice from the College if needed
 - Looking after your colleagues. If you feel a friend or workmate has posted Information online that could be damaging for them, consider letting them know directly and discreetly⁸.
- The disinhibiting nature of social media in group forums can mean that constructive discussion and resolution is often difficult to achieve by trying to address concerns openly on the forum.
- If the comments could be considered defamatory (defamation is the act of making untrue statements about another which damages his/her reputation ⁷) midwives should seek advice from the statutory agency, Netsafe and further to this may consider legal advice.
- Any links that could be considered negative or derogatory should be removed from personal pages/sites. Further advice can be sought from Netsafe for removal of harmful content.

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- ² Midwifery Council of New Zealand, *Midwifery Council Code of Conduct. 2010. Wellington: MidwiferyCouncil.Reprinted2021*
<https://www.midwiferycouncil.health.nz/common/Uploaded%20files/Registration/Code%20of%20Conduct.pdf>
- ³ New Zealand College of Midwives, *Midwives Handbook for Practice. 5th ed. ed. 2015, Christchurch: New Zealand College of Midwives.*
- ⁴ Ministry of Justice NZ. (2015). Harmful Digital Communications Act. Wellington: Ministry of Justice.
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- ⁵ Huriwai, T & Baker, M (2016). Manaaki: Mana enhancing and Mana protecting practice. Wellington: Te Rau Matatini.
- ⁶ Ramsden, I. 2015. 'Towards cultural safety'. In Wepa D. (Ed.). *Cultural Safety in Aotearoa New Zealand* (2nd ed). Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, pp. 5-25.

- ⁷ Law.com. *Definition of "defamation"*. Available from <http://dictionary.law.com/>
- ⁸ Khan M, Faraz A, Jamal A, et al. (July 13, 2021) A Study to See the Effect of Social Media Usage Among Healthcare Providers. *Cureus* 13(7): e16350. doi:10.7759/cureus.16350
- ⁹ Ventola CL. Social media and health care professionals: benefits, risks, and best practices. *P T*. 2014;39(7):491-520.
- ¹⁰ Oxford Dictionaries. *Definition of "friend" in this context is "A contact on a social networking website"*. Available from: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>.

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Ratification:

*This statement was ratified at the New Zealand College of Midwives AGM on 30/07/15
Reviewed, updated and ratified on 23/11/22*

The purpose of New Zealand College of Midwives Consensus Statements is to provide women, midwives and the maternity services with the profession's position on any given situation. The guidelines are designed to educate and support best practice. All position statements are regularly reviewed and updated in line with evidence-based practice.