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MDs with publicly viewable Facebook pages exposing themselves to 'breaches in boundaries'

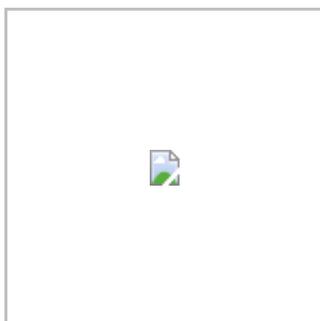
Sharon Kirkey, Postmedia News

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Doctors are sharing their personal information on publicly viewable Facebook pages, risky online habits that are not only exposing MDs to "unwanted intrusions" into their private lives but that also risk violating professional boundaries.

A new study of 1,000 family doctors in Ottawa found that 102, or 10 per cent, have publicly viewable Facebook profiles.

Almost all these public profiles included information on hobbies, "wall" posts and comments, recent Facebook activities and lists and photos of family members. "Furthermore, almost all were contactable, either through a message or a 'Friend' request, by any member of the general public," including their patients, the authors write.



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Mikael Kjellstrom/Postmedia News

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A smaller but important proportion - 14 per cent - also listed their relationship status, "information that empowers both fraudsters and perhaps even overly curious patients or community members seeking a connection with the subject outside the confines of their professional relationship," according to the authors.

Although the results suggest that a "reassuring majority" of doctors aren't accessible to their patients via Facebook, "our findings also indicate that a significant minority (one in 10) are vulnerable to breaches in professionalism and boundaries" on the social media site, the team concludes.

"While a minority of physicians have a publicly accessible Facebook profile, those that do are sharing personal information that may expose them to unwanted intrusions into their personal lives and unexpected patient interactions outside of the office."

The study is published in the British Journal of Medicine & Medical Research.

Physicians are held to a certain standard of professionalism by their licensing colleges, said lead author Dr. Kamila Premji, a family doctor in Ottawa.

"It means conducting yourself in a professional manner, maintaining a professional relationship with patients and not bringing a personal dimension to relationships," she said.

The [Canadian Medical Association](#) (CMA), the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia and other professional medical bodies have published guidelines on the appropriate use of social media by doctors and medical students.

Premji said she decided to do the study after a patient posted a message on her Facebook page, asking for her test results.

"I was concerned that I had made myself vulnerable to that type of breach," she said, adding it felt as if the patient had knocked on her door at home.

For their study, Premji and colleagues from the department of family medicine and the faculty of health sciences at the University of Ottawa collected the names of all 1,000 family doctors listed as practising medicine in Ottawa in 2012 from the [College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario](#) website.

Next they created a dummy Facebook account with no connections to other Facebook "friends" or networks.

Using that account, they searched for a publicly viewable Facebook profile for each of the family doctors identified. They found 102 matches. The doctors had been practicing for a mean of 17 years. Slightly more than half - 56 percent - were women.

None had made available "profoundly personal" information such as their political or religious views, date of birth, sexual orientation or direct contact information, such as email, telephone or instant messaging. "However, a fair number had made other personal information publicly available," Premji's team writes.

"Some people posted whether they were married or single or in a relationship," she said. " We found people who made their friends' list publicly visible (and) their list of family members visible." Doctors with more experience were more likely to share their relationship status.

The concern is that doctors might be expressing too much of their "intimate side," said co-author [Raywat Deonandan](#), an assistant professor in the interdisciplinary school of health sciences at the University of Ottawa.

"Let's say you see your doctor - you know his or her gender, age maybe, race maybe, (but) that's all you know about them. Now, suddenly, you have access to the activities they enjoy, where they go on vacation, how many kids they have - all those things," said Deonandan.

From a benevolent sense, "you have a fuller view of who they might be. On a more malevolent sense, you know things about them that maybe they don't even know about you. The power imbalance has kind of shifted now."

"Some people are comfortable with that. But a lot of people don't want the individuals who they're going to see with their pants off tomorrow in the office to also know about who they had dinner with last night," he said.

"The obvious message is that, for doctors, be aware that you're visible." Many doctors are likely completely unaware that that they have low settings on their privacy filters.

The CMA's guidelines on social media state that doctors should use "the most stringent security and privacy settings available" for the platform and that the privacy and security of a patient's information "is paramount and should never be shared beyond the circle of care."

A CMA online survey of 628 doctors in 2011 found that half - 51 per cent - have a Facebook account and are on it at least weekly. Fifteen per cent of respondents said they had received patient requests to "friend" them on Facebook. Many said they "routinely ignore" such requests, according to a summary of the study on the CMA's website.

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