

## Professionalism essentials



Professionalism refers to the professional values such as compassion, self-awareness, honesty and integrity that form the basis of medical practice. In Australia the expectations are outlined by the Medical Board of Australia: [Good medical practice: a code of conduct for doctors in Australia](#)

*Note: This content is a brief summary of the key issues on this topic. Further insights and information can be found on the Avant Learning Centre or by seeking medico-legal advice.*

### Social media

As a medical student or doctor, you need to be aware that there is no delineation between your professional and personal online presence. At all times you are expected to maintain the professional standards set out by the Medical Board. Always assume that at some stage a patient or colleague will be able to see your social media posts. Consider whether you are comfortable with that before posting.

Consider who you connect with when setting up your profile and before accepting any friend or follow requests. Connections with patients may be appropriate on some platforms but not others. If you are declining a request, you can send a polite response along the lines 'Unfortunately due to hospital/practice policy I am unable to accept connection requests from patients'. Ensure you do not use these connections to communicate specific clinical information with patients.

You may be contacted by people seeking information or advice from you in response to your online presence. Develop a strategy to respond to this. For example, refer them to their own treating doctor for any clinical advice in the first instance. If they ask to see you as their treating doctor and this is appropriate,

ensure that a formal doctor/patient relationship is established before any treatment is provided.

As a general rule you have a duty of confidentiality in relation to any information about your patients. Be very cautious about posting images of or information about patients. Never post any patient information on social media without specific consent, even if the image or information is apparently de-identified. If you do have consent, document this in the patient's clinical records.

See [Avant - Social media for doctors keeping it professional](#) for more information.

### Treating family and friends

There are a number of reasons why providing care to close friends, family members, or those with whom you work can be inappropriate. For example:

- You may find it awkward to ask sensitive questions and avoid doing so;
- The patient may not disclose sensitive information to you, which could be vital for their treatment;
- It may be uncomfortable for you and/or the patient to take a full history or conduct a full physical examination;

- It can be difficult to be objective or you may be influenced by information you know about them outside the consultation context;
- You may feel pressured into doing something you're not comfortable with e.g. writing a prescription or providing a medical certificate.

Unless it is an emergency you should always refer a friend or family member to their own general practitioner or treating doctor for ongoing care.

If you want to, the best way to help someone close to you may be to give them information about the best way to get care for their medical concern. This might be letting them know what to look for in a good GP or helping them identify the questions they need to ask their doctor.

For more information see [Avant – Treating family members friends or staff](#)

### Wellbeing

The medical profession can be a very stressful one, especially during training. Your professional obligations include recognising the impact of fatigue on your health and your ability to care for patients and avoiding self-prescribing. Be aware of the risks of self-diagnosis and treatment. The Medical Board stresses the importance of having your own general practitioner and seeking help when needed.

Increasingly there are resources available to support doctors and their health and wellbeing. For example [Doctors Health Advisory Service](#) or [Avant's Health and Wellbeing site](#).

### Checklist

- Be aware of your professional obligations when online
- Establish boundaries early on and a suitable personal response when someone close to you seeks clinical care or advice
- Avoid testing, treating or prescribing for yourself
- Have your own GP

### Want more?

Visit the Avant Learning Centre – [avant.org.au/avant-learning-centre](http://avant.org.au/avant-learning-centre) for resources including webinars, eLearning courses, case studies, articles and checklists.

