Think Twice Before Posting: Inappropriate Use of Social Media and Cyberbullying

Online media—social networking, video streaming, discussion boards, blogs, and virtual reality are available for anyone—including healthcare professionals—to use and share information. Although there are numerous and undeniable advantages to social media, too often it is used inappropriately.

Cyberbullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior via digital devices such as cell phones, computers, and tablets. Cyberbullies post information that can damage reputations or relationships of individuals or organizations through false or unreliable data, embarrassing personal information, and/or inappropriate or aggressive language. Because the consequences of cyberbullying and inappropriate use of social media can be personally, professionally and/or legally significant, nurse anesthetists must protect themselves and others from this type of harm.

Not a Victimless Crime
Nurse Anesthetists frequently share information on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and AANAConnet. While these platforms disseminate important information, unfortunately, they also provide an accessible and rapid way to spread rumors and intimidate others. Users can quickly and easily share inappropriate or threatening content (e.g., obscene or prejudicial dialect, sexual references, derogatory remarks, content revealing private information, or negative comments about an organization or employer) with thousands of other users.

Once something is posted online—it is there forever and could be resurrected later—even after deletion. Individuals may also take screen shots of social media posts and/or share on their own social media space or post on public websites.

A cyberbully who posts information that is untrue or has harmed the target’s reputation may be sued for defamation. Employees may be punished—warned or even fired—for inappropriate online behavior, especially if it harms their employer. Workplaces have an obligation to create a safe environment for employees and the right to take action against perpetrators. Employees targeted by threatening remarks can sue organizations that fail to address inappropriate social media use.

Protect Yourself and Others
Inappropriate social media posts—even if they don’t name a patient—can also violate the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). Boards of Nursing (BONs) may also get involved in situations related to inappropriate disclosures on social media such as unprofessional or unethical conduct, moral turpitude, and revealing confidential information.

In the hypothetical example below a CRNA who was involved in a difficult case with a student nurse anesthetist who did not perform well vents his frustrations online.

John Smith, CRNA at Apple Valley Hospital; Advocate for Student Education
“I cannot believe how horrible student nurse anesthetists are trained these days! My 2 PM endoscopy was a nightmare; the student showed up 15 minutes late and was not properly gowned for the case. Once she gowned she had uncontrollable tremors, which made it difficult to work the case because our patient was obese and had a compromised airway. She even forgot to change her gloves once they were contaminated. I don’t want to take another student from the ABC Anesthesia Program ever again!!! I can’t believe our hospital would put patients at risk.”

The CRNA violated patient confidentiality by disclosing information about the case, which could have implications not only to the CRNA, but also to the hospital and educational program. Often, individuals post content that they later regret when they are emotional. Examining one’s thoughts and communications before posting social media content that could be harmful to colleagues, organizations, or patients can prevent negative repercussions such as termination or litigation. Before posting to social media, consider: Am I emotional about the situation? Am I protecting patient confidentiality? Am I compromising my own integrity? Could my message damage the reputation of my employer, another individual, or special interest groups I represent? Could I get in legal trouble?
To protect yourself and others, report any type of social media threat or harassment promptly. Be sure to read and follow social media guidelines from healthcare organizations and societies to avoid risk of harm and retribution.

**Taking Action—Think Before You Post!**

Efficient technology reduces the time it takes to post content, giving individuals less time to consider its appropriateness or possible ramifications. Even if you believe a post is harmless, take the time to consider how it could harm you or others.

Nurse anesthetists play an instrumental role in promoting a culture of safety and a healthy work environment that includes appropriate use of social media. Additional resources and guidance for nurses on the topic of social media usage can be found in the National Council of State Boards of Nursing’s (NCSBN) White Paper: A Nurse’s Guide to the Use of Social Media and the American Nurses Association’s (ANA) Social Networking Principles Toolkit. The AANA has resources aimed at preventing bullying and improving workplace culture: www.aana.com/bullying.

**Myths and Facts About Social Media**

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<th>Myth</th>
<th>Fact</th>
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<tr>
<td>It is ok to post false, defamatory remarks about someone.</td>
<td>These posts could have legal implications and individuals could be subject to defamation lawsuits.</td>
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<td>Content that has been deleted from a website or social media platform is no longer available.</td>
<td>Content remains on servers forever and can be subpoenaed if needed.</td>
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<td>Social media posts or communications are private and accessible only to intended recipient.</td>
<td>Individuals can take screenshots of posts and share them to themselves or to their own social media following. A once-private post is now public.</td>
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<td>It is acceptable to refer to patients if they are not identified by name, but by nicknames, diagnosis or conditions.</td>
<td>Nurse anesthetists must recognize the ethical and legal obligation to maintain patient privacy and confidentiality at all times.</td>
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**Suggested Reading and References**