Social media and the rise of influencers

Jo-Ann Taylor, dento-legal adviser at the Dental Defence Union (DDU), discusses the rise of dental social media influencers.

The rise of dental influencers

It is becoming increasingly common for dental professionals to utilise social media channels to increase their professional presence online, for example to advertise their services; to help disseminate dental knowledge to the wider public; and to form professional networks with other clinicians.

As such, in recent years there has been a rise in dental 'influencers'. Broadly speaking, this is an individual who has access to an audience and can influence others to act based on their recommendations. While influencers are most commonly associated with Instagram, they also produce content for other channels such as Facebook, TikTok and YouTube.

Dental professionals may become influencers for a number of different reasons. Some use social media platforms to explore issues related to being a dental professional, to encourage others into the profession or to inform and educate the general public on various health topics. Consequently, many have been approached by high-profile dental, health,

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fitness and lifestyle brands to become brand ambassadors or to participate in brand events and webinars.

The advantage of dental professionals becoming prominent on social media is that it can be an invaluable method of raising awareness of oral health campaigns/conditions and connecting the public with health education from those who have the most appropriate knowledge to give it. If done well, it can enhance the image of the profession, making it more accessible and encouraging people to engage with dental professionals.

Without input from qualified dental professionals, health misinformation could go unchallenged on social media so it is important that the dental profession should

have some presence in these spheres. However, it is important to exercise caution if asked for specific advice by an individual as doing so is likely to establish a duty of care and could allow a patient to pursue a clinical negligence claim if they were dissatisfied with any advice received.

The GDC's guidance on social media

In its guidance on social media use,¹ the General Dental Council (GDC) states that when using social media, dental professionals must:

- 'Maintain and protect patients' information by not publishing any information which could identify them on social media without their explicit consent
- Maintain appropriate boundaries in the relationships you have with patients and other members of the dental team
- Comply with any internet and social media policy set out by your employer.'

'Dental professionals need to be mindful about the content they produce and share on social media platforms. It is important not to discuss individual patients, living or dead.'

The GDC also states that the responsibilities of dental professionals do not change because they are communicating via social media. Indeed, as a dental professional 'you have a responsibility to behave professionally both online and offline. Your professional responsibilities, such as patient confidentiality and professional courtesy, are still fundamental when you use social media.'

Considerations when engaging with social media

Dental professionals need to be mindful about the content they produce and share on social media platforms. For example, it may be tempting to relay anecdotes or examples from your clinical practice to illustrate a point. However, it is important not to discuss individual patients, living or dead. Posting details of a clinical case, however heavily anonymised, without patient consent could be a breach of confidentiality – as could sharing a photograph of a patient's condition. It might be possible for someone to identify a patient even when discussing a case anonymously.

Also, it is important to consider how any comments you make either at an event or on

social media may be perceived by colleagues, patients or the general public.

Additionally, it is imperative that social media influencers are upfront and honest regarding any payment they receive as a result of a brand event or any social media activity undertaken.

Advertisements must be clearly defined as such at the start of the post, commonly with the hashtag #AD,² or similar. The Advertising Standards Authority also states that 'if a brand gives an influencer a payment, free item, or other "perk", any resulting posts referencing the brand or their products become subject to consumer protection law, enforced by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and others, such as Trading Standards'.³

Finally, it is important to ensure that you have appropriate indemnity in place for any work done in your capacity as a dental professional. It may be advisable to contact your

dental defence organisation. DDU members can find more information in the DDU's member guide at www.theddu.com.

References

1. General Dental Council. Guidance on using social media. Effective from 27 June 2016. Available at: https://www.gdc-uk.org/docs/default-source/guidance-documents/guidance-on-using-social-media.pdf?sfvrsn=de158345_2 (accessed 29 June 2021).
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