

Blogging: Tip-sheet for Medical Students

Center for Biomedical Ethics and Humanities and Office of the Dean of Students

University of Virginia School of Medicine

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The University of Virginia is a community of scholars in which the ideals of freedom of inquiry, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of the individual are sustained.

Students Rights and Responsibilities, University of Virginia, <http://www.virginia.edu/vpsa/rights.html>

An increasing number of medical students and other health professionals have joined communities on the internet, through blogging and other forms of social networking. In addition, some folks have experienced distress in discovering their words available on the internet, when they intended them solely to go to a few friends. Through this handout, we hope to help UVa medical students navigate through some of the practical, ethical, and professional hazards of blogging.

A substantial community of bloggers continues to develop a number of blogging codes of ethics. One developed by and for health care bloggers is reprinted below. If you are a reader of or contributor to healthcare blogs, we strongly suggest that you familiarize yourself with this code. Anyone thinking about developing a blog should consider membership in this community, or a similar one, to allow participation in the continuing conversation about developing norms of behavior in this area.

Healthcare Blogger Code of Ethics

- 1. Clear representation of perspective** - readers must understand the training and overall perspective of the author of a blog. Certainly bloggers can have opinions on subjects outside of their training, and these opinions may be true, but readers must have a place to look on a blog to get an idea of where this author is coming from. This also encompasses the idea of the distinction between advertisement and content. This does not preclude anonymous blogging, but it asks that even anonymous bloggers share the professional perspective from which they are blogging.
- 2. Confidentiality** - Bloggers must respect the nature of the relationship between patient and medical professionals and the clear need for confidentiality. All discussions of patients must be done in a way in which patients' identity cannot be inferred. A patient's name can only be revealed in a way that is in keeping with the laws that govern that practice (HIPPA, Informed Consent).
- 3. Commercial Disclosure** - the presence or absence of commercial ties of the author must be made clear for the readers. If the author is using their blog to pitch a product, it must be clear that they are doing that. Any ties to device manufacturer and/or pharmaceutical company ties must be clearly stated.
- 4. Reliability of Information** - citing sources when appropriate and changing inaccuracies when they are pointed out
- 5. Courtesy** - Bloggers should not engage in personal attacks, nor should they allow their commenters to do so. Debate and discussion of ideas is one of the major purposes of blogging. While the ideas people hold should be criticized and even confronted, the overall purpose is a discussion of ideas, not those who hold ideas.

(Available at <http://medbloggercode.com/the-code/>. Accessed April 10, 2009)

Some Additional Points to Consider

1. **The physician-patient relationship is built on trust.** Accordingly, a health care professional's obligation to patients in blogging goes beyond meeting federal privacy regulations. The Healthcare Blogger's Code of Ethics reminds that "All discussions of patients must be done in a way in which patients' identity cannot be inferred." Thus, no one, including the patient, should be able to identify the patient in your blog. While confidentiality per se may not be breached if no one but the patient can identify herself, a patient still may feel exploited or feel that her trust has been violated. Some recommend that bloggers ask the consent of any patients who might be included in a blog, and even invite them to comment.
2. **Patients, colleagues, and employers might read your writings.** Many people expect physicians to behave in a professional manner even when they are "off the clock." Individuals reading your blog will be judging the attitudes presented there. A potential patient, for example, might be offended by the way you talk about your patients, patients in general, or the medical community. Your future employer might judge your collegiality by the way you talk about classmates or professionals you're working with.
3. **Beware of unintentional blogging.** Anything you send over the internet (e.g., email, social networks) may end up before an audience much wider than you intended, either because of an inadvertent error on your part, or because someone else passed it along. The guidelines discussed in this memo can equally apply to those communications as well.
4. **The thorny problem of comments.** One hazard to consider prior to blogging is the possibility of other people posting comments to your blog that violate ethical norms or are otherwise unacceptable to you. Here again is helpful advice from a general blogger's code of ethics:

"Take responsibility not just for your own words, but for the comments you allow on your blog." This code defines as unacceptable content in comments "anything included or linked that is:

- being used to abuse, harass, stalk or threaten a person or persons
- libelous, defamatory, knowingly false or misrepresents another person
- infringes upon any copyright, trademark, trade secret or patent of any third party
- violates any obligation of confidentiality
- violates the privacy, publicity, moral or any other right of any third party
- contains editorial content that has been commissioned and paid for by a third party."

(Available at <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/2007/04/draft-bloggers-1.html>. Accessed April 17, 2009.)

Knowing how you are going to deal with unacceptable comments to your blog ahead of time (and communicating with readers about your policy) will allow you to take quick action if the need arises. You might wish to consider setting up your blog so that you are able to review comments before they are posted, rather than be tasked with the responsibility of identifying and removing unacceptable comments after they are made.

Remember that every time you blog you are not only representing yourself, but also are representing the medical profession.