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Can I share my political views online?

While social media may seem like a place for sharing personal feelings rather than professional opinions, doctors must remain aware of how they could be perceived, **Abi Rimmer** hears

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Your behaviour matters

Emma Davies, medicolegal consultant at the Medical Protection Society, says, “Given the conflicts around the world and the pressures on the NHS, it’s expected that we’ll have our own opinions on these emotive matters. Social media are ever changing and fast growing, and they’ve been the downfall of some high profile people. Doctors may not be ‘high profile’ but in my experience they too are exposed to personal and professional risk from expressing strongly held views on social media.

“There can be a fine balance between freedom of speech and a doctor’s right to an opinion as a member of the public, and the expectation of how a doctor should behave. Many doctors, like anyone, view social media as an outlet to vent or voice frustrations on political matters or even just a bad day at work. Even though you are posting in a personal capacity, however, the public is likely to see you solely as a doctor.

“The General Medical Council’s *Good Medical Practice* guidance states, ‘How you behave when using social media matters. Medical professionals, like everyone else, have rights to freedom of belief, privacy, and expression. But exercising these rights when using social media as a medical professional has to be balanced with the possible impact on other people’s rights and interests.’

“The GMC also warns that content uploaded anonymously can be traced back to its point of origin. And when using private messaging apps or private groups the content could also become public. The regulator makes clear that it has a legal duty to investigate concerns raised regarding social media that reach its fitness to practise threshold.

“Before posting on any social media platform, ask yourself: Would I say this out loud to a group of patients, peers, or a family member? Could this comment be viewed by some as offensive or discriminatory? Could what I am about to say be viewed as putting the reputation of my profession at risk? How might the GMC view this comment?

“Social media are vital communication tools for personal and professional use. When used with caution, in line with guidance from the GMC, your employer, and the law, they can be powerful in educating patients, debating, and facilitating learning.”

Consider why you are sharing

Tom Holdsworth, GP, clinical director of Townships 1 primary care network and chair of Sheffield PCN clinical directors, says, “To deny doctors the ability

to express political views would be a serious infringement of their rights as citizens. It would also exclude a group of people who often have great insights into the big challenges of society.

“The GMC has general guidance on use of social media including that you must not share political views if they cause patients distress. If you aren’t infringing this guidance (noting that causing disagreement should not be confused with causing distress) then there is no reason you can’t share views online—the more interesting question is whether you should.

“Politics—the decisions about who gets what when and how—are involved when policy is created around allocation of resources, including how much care the state will provide people and how equally.

“Government departments make decisions all the time that affect the building blocks of health—such as clean water; food; safe and warm housing; and good jobs and schools—and, again, how equally these are distributed. Doctors can and should have a role in influencing these decisions in ways that positively affect their patients. There are well known examples of doctors, such as Michael Marmot, who have done this effectively.

“It’s also worth considering why you are sharing your views and what you hope to achieve. Social media may not be the best places to let off steam. You may well receive difficult comments from others which aggravate rather than relieve your frustration.

“Think about whether people with the power to enact change are likely to read your tweet and whether it will influence them. Of course, there are many benefits to social media such as connecting with people who are dealing with similar challenges, finding allies for your cause, and sharing articles and information.

“There are also other ways to exert political influence such as writing for print media, speaking to local MPs and councillors, and building contacts in local radio and television. The key is to act intentionally, considering the pros and cons of different routes of engagement and how these align with your motivation.”

Beware of amplifying lies

Rajin Chowdhury, specialty registrar in anaesthetics and intensive care medicine, Yorkshire and the Humber Deanery-South, says, “I was a political activist from 2015-19 and a candidate for parliament in 2019. Campaigning in several local elections, a history defining referendum, and three general elections taught me that unless you’re a celebrity,

journalist, or famous politician, your social media influence is almost zero.

“The most important part of a political campaign is the national narrative—but this is the remit of career politicians. For most of us who want to help, we’re better off delivering leaflets and knocking on doors than posting angrily on social media. You won’t get likes and retweets that way, but it probably does more good.

“The ease with which we can access social media means we often post knee jerk reactions but there’s limited evidence that arguing online changes people’s minds. When a matter is important to them, people are far more likely to be persuaded by emotions than facts.

“Indeed, sharing contrary facts often gets the opposite reaction to the one you hope to achieve. Nobody likes admitting that they’re wrong—especially publicly—so people become more strident in their position rather than backing down.

“Quote tweeting a lie should be a never event. I would recommend using George Lakoff’s ‘truth sandwich’ instead: tell the truth, indicate the lie, finish with the truth. While doctors are largely allowed to post what we like on social media, it doesn’t mean we should. Often, we end up amplifying the lies we’re trying to fight.”

Be respectful and tolerant

Jason Sarfo-Annin, GP, says, “There are different types of politics. Big ‘P’ politics involves political parties, policy announcements, soundbites, and slogans. Small ‘p’ politics involves the decisions we make in our lives, including in medicine. While politics has unfortunately become solely associated with the big ‘P’, it’s important to recognise that at the heart of politics are choices.

“The decision to couch the case for smoking cessation to a patient based on cancer risk, financial savings, or both, is a political one. If you know the patient well, you’ll reflect on their beliefs and make an appropriate choice on that basis. If you don’t know the patient, you may make a choice based on what you perceive to be important.

“No one reading this article is apolitical. With that in mind, why shouldn’t doctors share political views online? Healthcare provision requires choices—our jobs are inherently political. This isn’t just about decisions about how much funding the NHS receives, even our clinical guidelines are political.

“The current variance in guidelines for asthma is political in the sense that the methodology to produce those guidelines differs. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence considers health economics, and the British Thoracic Society and Scottish Intercollegiate Guideline Network have chosen not to. Which approach is better? Why? What are the trade-offs? The decision to harmonise the guidelines later this year is just as political. Many readers will already be sharing small ‘p’ political views without realising that they’re doing so.

“If one is respectful and tolerant of people with opposing views or differing priorities, one is unlikely to cause enmity by sharing political views. It’s important that doctors engage in political discussions in medicine and in wider society. Otherwise, they may find that choices affecting doctors and their patients are made without them.”