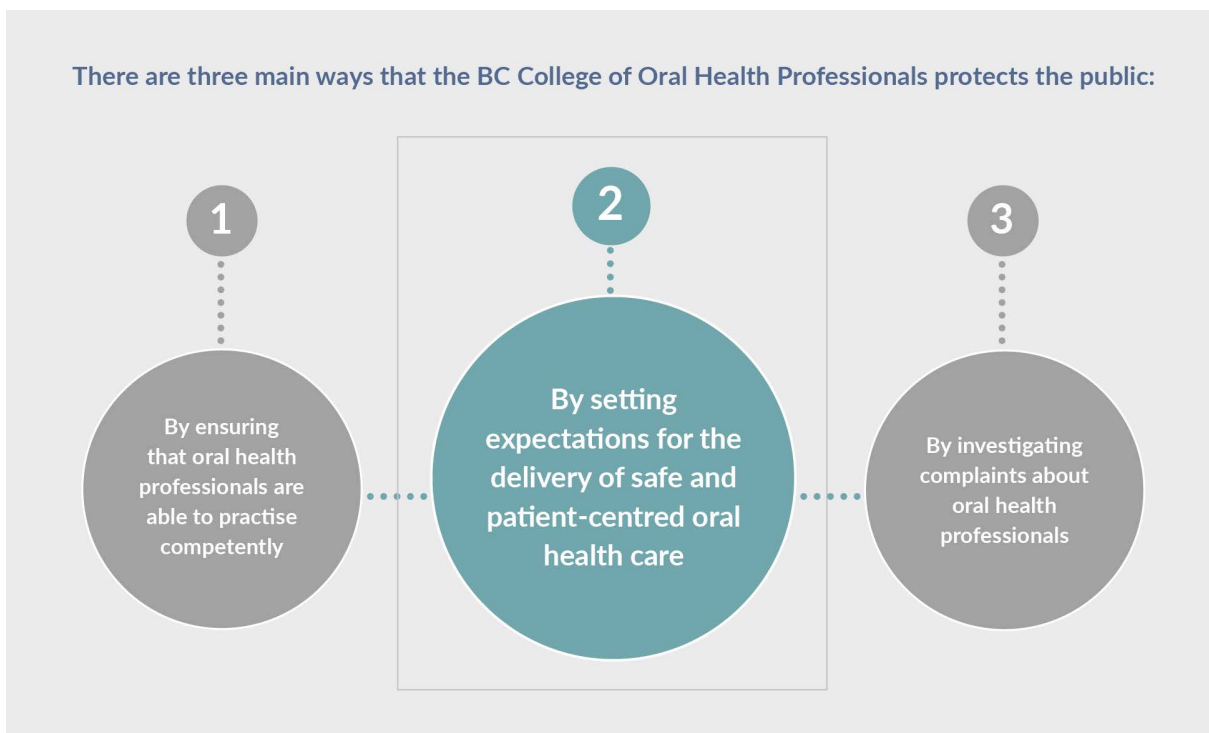


## Expectations for clinical and ethical practice

# Interpretation Guidelines: Social Media

Applies to Dental Hygienists

There are three main ways that the BC College of Oral Health Professionals protects the public:



The British Columbia College of Oral Health Professionals (BCCOHP) was created on September 1, 2022 through the amalgamation of four health regulatory colleges: the College of Dental Hygienists of BC, the College of Dental Surgeons of BC, the College of Dental Technicians of BC, and the College of Denturists of BC. All current requirements for standards of clinical and ethical practice issued by the four colleges remain in place upon amalgamation. This document was created by the College of Dental Hygienists of British Columbia and will be updated to reflect the amalgamation.

# Social Media

May 5, 2020 Update: The CDHBC Interpretation Guidelines are under review. The content of these guidelines remains in place at this time; however, they need to be applied in the context of the new Dental Hygienists Regulation and CDHBC Bylaws. Readers are welcome to contact the CDHBC office if they have questions about the application of these guidelines in the interim time.

## PURPOSE

To provide guidelines on the use of social media by dental hygienists.

## BACKGROUND

The term “social media” refers to web and mobile technologies and practices that people use to search for and share content, opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives online. It includes blogs, online forums, podcasts, and commonly recognized networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Instagram.

The use of social media is expanding rapidly, blurring the boundaries between public and private space. Anything posted on social media lives in a virtual space and may end up in the public domain permanently, irrespective of the intent at the time of posting. Confidentiality can never be guaranteed.

Expectations of professional and ethical conduct are the same whether dental hygienists are interacting in person, or online through social media. Dental hygienists should be vigilant in avoiding online situations that may be harmful to clients and detrimental to their own credibility and reputation.

Dental hygienists should generally refrain from establishing personal connections with clients online. In some instances it may be acceptable to create an online connection with clients for professional purposes only. In these instances dental hygienists should establish a professional account that accurately conveys their credentials, and is used separately from their personal account in order to maintain appropriate boundaries. While use of a professional account may be acceptable for certain purposes, such as sharing educational resources or general information, dental hygienists are cautioned against providing clinical advice to any one individual via social media or in a public domain.

Any marketing carried out using social media must comply with the College’s marketing bylaws. Additionally, dental hygienists are expected to declare conflicts of interest when using social media where applicable (e.g. corporate affiliations or sponsorships).

From a legal standpoint, dental hygienists should consider whether the content they publish violates defamation, privacy and/or plagiarism laws. From an ethical and professional standpoint, they should also consider whether client privacy expectations and confidentiality may be overtly or unintentionally compromised. Additionally, while it is not appropriate to regulate and discipline all conduct that occurs outside a dental hygienist's practice, if there is off duty conduct that threatens the public, or the public's perception of the profession, the College is justified in investigating. Under the *Health Professions Act*, dental hygienists also have a duty to report any illegal or unethical conduct by other licensed health professionals to the appropriate regulatory college.

## POLICY

Dental hygienists should exercise caution when posting personal information on social media platforms. Clear professional boundaries must be maintained, which is facilitated by use of professional accounts that are separate from personal accounts. Additionally, posting content that could be viewed as unprofessional, or that puts public trust in the profession at risk, should be avoided.

Dental hygienists must always maintain the confidentiality of client information and never post identifiable client information or images to social media – even in a closed or private online forum.

Dental hygienists should read, understand, and apply the strictest privacy settings to maintain control over access to their personal information. At the same time, it should be recognized that privacy settings are imperfect and can be compromised.

The privacy of clients, colleagues and co-workers must be respected. Dental hygienists must respect others' privacy by carefully managing information acquired from social media. Dental hygienists must also avoid searching online sources for private client information that has no relevance to the client's dental hygiene care.

Dental hygienists must be familiar with the practice standards that govern their practice, as well as applicable laws. Defamatory statements published online may result in allegations of libel or slander. Plagiarism and copyright infringement can also lead to legal action. For this reason, dental hygienists should provide credit and links when sharing information from other original sources.

Dental hygienists should represent their credentials accurately when used with social media for professional purposes. They should ensure that the content they post aligns with the dental hygiene scope of practice, practice standards, and code of ethics, and reflects information that

is evidence-based or from legitimate sources. Dental hygienists should also declare conflicts of interest where applicable.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The College of Dental Hygienists of British Columbia gratefully acknowledges the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia and the British Columbia College of Nursing Professionals for granting permission to adopt content from existing practice guidelines on social media.

**Added to Handbook: October 2018**