Clinician's Commentary on Laliberté et al.¹

What proportion of physiotherapy professionals are on Facebook, and how do they use it? To answer this question, Laliberté and colleagues conducted an online survey of physiotherapists and physical rehabilitation therapists in the province of Quebec, seeking information on their Facebook knowledge and behaviour. Their results provide new data on practising physiotherapy professionals' use of Facebook and raise several professional and ethical concerns.

Since its founding in 2004, Facebook's online community has continually grown in size, and the platform now has close to 1.5 billion active users.² It is no wonder, therefore, that most respondents in Laliberté and colleagues' study reported having a Facebook account. It is also not surprising that those who had an account tended to be younger than those who did not; this finding is consistent with Canadian polling data on social media use.³

Most shocking is the number of respondents who had clients as Facebook friends. While these therapists were more likely to be informed about their workplace's Facebook policy than those who did not, the majority of their interactions with patients were nevertheless personal rather than professional. Some participants reported having posted something about work or about their clients on their profile, despite the fact that the majority also knew that "public" Facebook content can be seen by anyone on the Web and that "deleted" Facebook content can still be found. Furthermore, fewer than 1 in 30 reported having a professional profile, and even fewer had a professional page, which suggests that their personal profiles were being used for this communication with their clients.

Laliberté and colleagues' findings raise several professional and ethical concerns, including the potential for breaches of confidentiality and of patient and practitioner privacy, as well as the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional domains. Basevi and colleagues,⁴ in their review of the literature on social media use in health care, identified all these issues as key themes. They found that privacy and confidentiality, in particular, were most commonly discussed in the literature; and, indeed, Laliberté and colleagues also identify these as concerns. This is not surprising, given that health professionals have breached confidentiality on social media,⁵ and such breaches are made worse by the relatively permanent nature of information on the Internet.⁶ Moreover, when health professionals are lax in their use of privacy settings or have patients as friends on Facebook, both patient and professional may learn things about each other that negatively affect the treatment relationship.

Social media can also challenge otherwise clear-cut boundaries between private and professional lives. Students have been found to have trouble with identifying this boundary,⁴ and health professionals at all levels of experience can have similar difficulties. This past winter, unprofessional and offensive material posted on Facebook by students at the University of Dalhousie's Faculty of Dentistry created a public and media furore.⁷ Among the recently published findings of the restorative justice process in this case was that while students, faculty, staff, and members of the profession could recite expectations for appropriate conduct on the clinic floor in clear-cut situations, they had greater

difficulty with more nuanced situations, both on and off the clinical floor.⁷ These findings underline the need for further education on professional boundaries and obligations, not only for students but for all professionals, both on social media and in other more nuanced situations outside the traditional clinical setting.

Another of Basevi and colleagues' key findings was a lack of guidelines from institutions and professional bodies.⁴ This feeling of a lack of guidance was echoed by participants in Laliberté and colleagues' study, as well as by the authors. While the Canadian Physiotherapy Association has released guidelines for social media use,⁸ Alberta is the only province whose college has released specific guidelines.⁹ Although brief, Physiotherapy Alberta's guidelines provide clear and useful advice that touches on many key themes. Other regulatory bodies, such as the College of Physiotherapists of Ontario, have issued advice in newsletters and refer to established policies¹⁰ rather than publishing any official guidelines or standards for social media use.

Laliberté and colleagues' study contributes greatly to the literature by providing information on practising physiotherapy professionals' use and knowledge of Facebook. While study participants were able to outline many risks and benefits associated with social media use, the findings expose several potential ethical concerns. Regulatory bodies should seek to publish social media guidelines of their own, based on professional standards and ethical principles, while engaging and educating their members to ensure that these standards are understood and followed. As social media platforms continue to grow, along with the proportion of physiotherapists who use them, it is essential that we as a profession be equipped with the knowledge to use them wisely.

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