E-professionalism among young doctors:
A survey of residents' Facebook content

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INTRODUCTION

- Facebook is the largest social networking service with over 1 billion active users worldwide, and over 19 million active Canadian users.

- A major concern with Facebook usage is that many physicians may be blurring the lines between personal and professional lives and using Facebook in ways that may challenge the ethical boundaries of medical professionalism.

- Facebook profiles reveal personal information that can be accessed by unintended viewers. The availability of profiles has the potential to impact the doctor-patient relationship and can interfere with the maintenance of professional boundaries.

- Additionally, many medical professionals lack awareness around the vulnerability of their online profile. Past research has shown that physicians' profiles can contain inappropriate and unprofessional content.

- Furthermore, junior residents may be at particularly risk as they are more likely to use social networking services as compared to senior physicians, and may still be transitioning into their professional roles.
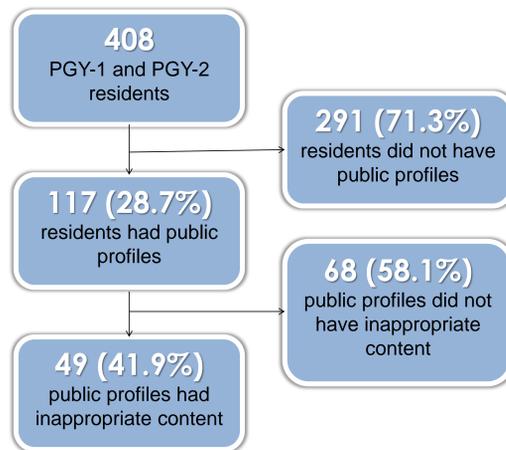
AIM

- Assess the extent of publicly visible Facebook use by junior residents at the University of Ottawa.

- Describe the nature of the content available on resident's Facebook pages.

METHODS

- Surveyed all PGY-1 and PGY-2 residents in the 2012-2013 cohort at the University of Ottawa (n=408).

- Searched Facebook as a generic user to find publicly viewable profiles.

- Profiles were deemed available if they:

  a) were retrieved by a search of the resident's full name; and

  b) contained at least one piece of confirmatory information, e.g. current employment.

- Reported presence and type of posted demographic data.

- Assessed all components of the profile, including comments and photos, for the presence and nature of potentially 'inappropriate' content.

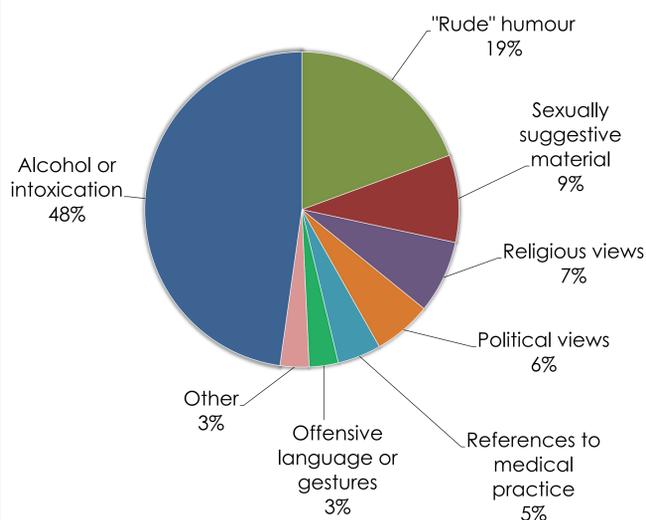- Divided the inappropriate content into categories.

RESULTS

Summary of residents' Facebook presence

408 PGY-1 and PGY-2 residents

291 (71.3%) residents did not have public profiles

117 (28.7%) residents had public profiles

68 (58.1%) public profiles did not have inappropriate content

49 (41.9%) public profiles had inappropriate content

Out of all the junior residents of the 2012-2013 cohort, 28.7% had a Facebook profile that could be found by a public user. Of those with public profiles, 41.9% had posted inappropriate content.

Categories of inappropriate content

- "Rude" humour 19%
- Sexually suggestive material 9%
- Religious views 7%
- Political views 6%
- References to medical practice 5%
- Offensive language or gestures 3%
- Other 3%
- Alcohol or intoxication 48%

Instances of inappropriate content were divided into categories. The majority of the inappropriate content related to alcohol or intoxication, and "rude" humour e.g. racist or sexist jokes.

Demographic data available on public profiles

Demographic data	N (%) public profiles
Birth date or age	5 (4.3)
Gender	88 (75.2)
Relationship status	35 (29.9)
Sexual orientation	6 (5.1)
Current location	68 (58.1)
Hometown	43 (36.8)
Employment details	39 (33.3)
Contact information	1 (0.9)

The majority of public profiles displayed pieces of residents' demographic data.

DISCUSSION

- This study found that almost one third of PGY-1 and PGY-2 residents (28.7%) had Facebook profiles that were available to the public. These results are similar to the most recent published direct observational study by MacDonald et al. 2010.

- The majority of profiles presented personal information about the residents, which may be seen by a wider audience than originally intended.

- Also, aspects such as sexual orientation, political, or religious views may discourage patients from discussing issues and impair the doctor-patient relationship.

- Of the publicly available profiles, 41.9% contained potentially inappropriate or unprofessional content. The majority of these cases involved either alcohol consumption (48%) or "rude" humour (19%).

- In an online setting, this material can easily be shared and removed from its original context, which may increase the chance of it being interpreted as offensive. Of note, there were no instances of a breach of confidentiality.

- When social networking content is available to the public, it can reflect on a physician's professional life. Educators may be able to influence behaviours by addressing the use of social networking as a component of professionalism.

CONCLUSIONS

- Residents are active members of Facebook, and many allow public access to their content and personal information.

- Maintaining a professional online presence and safeguarding their privacy requires thoughtful and careful use of the social networking sites' security features.

- Because of the ethical, legal and professional issues that can arise from social networking usage, educators and regulators have a role to play in increasing residents' awareness of their vulnerability online, and in promoting guidelines around e-professionalism.

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