

## Physicians are not your (Facebook) friends

by Nancy Cawley Jean and Hospital Impact

When you're sick, hopefully the first person you call is your physician. In that sense, he or she IS your friend. But unless you've got a standing relationship with your physician outside the exam room, that's where the "friendship" should end.

But in today's socially connected world, physicians who are on Facebook with personal accounts may find themselves receiving "friend" requests from patients. While there are policies in the works from several agencies like the American Medical Association, nothing has yet to be formalized. There are several sources for guiding physicians, like this [article from FiercePracticeManagement](#), many physicians are still left in a quandary. As a result, several of our physicians have asked us what they should do. We worked with our legal department to develop some guidelines for our doctors to consider if and when they receive these requests.

Although this goes against the social media "be social!" mantra, first and foremost, we have recommended that they not accept the friend request, based on a few simple facts. The first is obvious: physicians must maintain patient privacy and confidentiality at all times, and while that's easy to do in a hospital or office setting, the lines can become a bit blurred when it comes to the world of Facebook. It's not out of the realm of possibility for a patient to initiate a conversation on a Facebook wall that could cross the line, thereby eroding the boundaries of the physician-patient relationship, and possibly even threatening ethical standards because of the casual nature of communication on the social network.

We also have asked physicians to keep in mind that accepting friend requests from patients will allow those patients to see personal information and have a glimpse into the private lives of the physicians. Unless the privacy settings are tweaked carefully, patients who are now Facebook friends would be privy to the doctor's conversations with friends, or see the photos of dinner and cocktails last weekend. It could change the professional image and reputation of a physician if a patient can see into the private and/or social life of a physician.

I recognize that this may go against the grain, but we felt it was in our physicians' best interests to keep their personal and professional lives separate. On the other hand, if they were to establish a Facebook account for their practice, I believe that would involve a totally different set of guidelines.

I'm very interested to hear how other hospital marketers and social media managers are advising their physicians. Share your thoughts!

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