Social Media and Health Care—Protecting Patient Privacy

Whether you’re on your way to becoming a medical lab technician or a nurse, it’s important to be careful about what you post on social media sites and to maintain a professional relationship with the patients with whom you come into contact. According to the American Nurses Association (ANA) (2011), “Social networks and the Internet provide unparalleled opportunities for rapid knowledge exchange and dissemination among many people, but this exchange does not come without risk. ... Online content and behavior has the potential to enhance or undermine not only the individual nurse’s career, but also the nursing profession” (para. 1). This is true for medical lab technicians as well.

Due to the importance and legality of protecting confidentiality, professional organizations have guidelines for upholding professional boundaries in a social networking environment. All healthcare workers should clearly understand the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) and how to avoid possible privacy violations (Lachman, 2013). As a nurse or medical lab technician, it’s your job to know, understand, and adhere to these principles, as you are required to be guardians of confidential patient information.

The ANA’s Principles for Social Networking state that one should not post or share online individually identifiable patient information; should follow ethically prescribed professional patient—nurse or —MLT boundaries; understand that patients, colleagues, institutions, and employers may view postings; take advantage of privacy settings to separate personal and professional information online; report to the appropriate authorities content that could harm a patient’s privacy, rights, or welfare; and participate in developing institutional policies governing online conduct (ANA, 2011).

To help healthcare professionals avoid problems with social media use, the ANA (2011) cautions you to remember that the standards of professionalism are the same online as in any other circumstance and that you should promptly report a breach of confidentiality or privacy. They say that you not take, share, or post patient photos, videos, or information gained through your professional relationship. They recommend you don’t engage in online contact with patients in order to maintain professional boundaries with them. It’s also important to not make disparaging remarks about patients, employers, or co-workers, even if they are not identified, on social media sites. You never know who will see it if you do (ANA, 2011).

Be thoughtful before you post or tweet, as online postings may have future implications; they could harm your future employability, limit your professional advancement, and reflect poorly on you and your profession (Lachman, 2013).

References: