Social Networking and Mental Health Providers: Practice Trends and Perspectives to Shape Interdisciplinary Guidelines

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Background: Social networking activity and media development in health care are advancing rapidly and without a firm understanding of implication for use among mental health providers. Social networking is used to provide education, foster advocacy, promote the profession, and influence policy, but with potential to violate therapeutic boundaries, infringe upon privacy, create liability, and damage professional credibility.

Objective: This survey was designed to examine current social networking practice trends and perspectives from psychiatric nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, and therapists. Determining how mental health providers engage in social networking activity and their viewpoints on best practice offers a basis for recommending interdisciplinary guidelines.

Design: A 20-question online survey was used to gather data from mental health providers recruited through professional member forums, e-mail distribution lists, and social media.

Results: Key findings demonstrate an extensive use of social networking sites on personal devices for research, continuing education, and peer collaboration; a need to restrict patient communication and access to a provider’s social network; and a desire for specific
guidelines to promote prudent, resourceful use of social media that complies with ethical codes, promotes professionalism, and maintains work-life boundaries.

Conclusions: Results demonstrate the increasing use and evolving nature of social networking requires that clinicians maintain situational awareness of media platforms and technology and a need for further analysis, education, and collaboration to develop a comprehensive consensus model for social networking behavior.