



Electronic Communication and Social Media Standard

Electronic communication and social media are powerful tools that are used by kaiwhakaora ngangahau occupational therapists every day in both a professional and personal capacity. As registered health professionals, kaiwhakaora ngangahau are expected to ensure all electronic communication is consistent with the [Competencies for Registration and Continuing practice](#) and the [Code of Ethics](#).

This standard details the expectations of all kaiwhakaora ngangahau when using electronic communication and or social media. This document will be used by Te Poari Whakaora Ngangahau o Aotearoa Occupational Therapy Board of New Zealand and other bodies when considering notifications received about a kaiwhakaora ngangahau and their use of electronic communication and/or social media.

For the purposes of this standard, electronic communication and social media include a wide variety of communication methods and platforms which is rapidly evolving. Common examples include:

- texting
- email
- social media such as Facebook, Snapchat or LinkedIn
- individual or group messaging platforms
- use of apps for symptom monitoring, goal tracking, information sharing or other purposes
- video platforms
- virtual reality and AI interaction
- content platforms such as blogs, websites, and other knowledge sites
- platforms used in the practice setting to record client notes.

Communication with individuals, groups and the public are included in this standard, both synchronous (occurring at the same time) or asynchronous (occurring at differing times).

Other relevant standards and guides

[Professional Boundaries for occupational therapists](#)

[Telehealth Guidelines for occupational therapists](#)

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Relationships with people receiving occupational therapy services

As an occupational therapist, you shall:

- 1.1 Respect the autonomy of people receiving your service, acknowledging their roles in whānau and their community.
- 1.2 Ensure that people receiving your services feel safe and accepted and that you are aware of the impact or potential impact of your actions, omissions or attitudes.
- 1.3 Demonstrate that the mana, tino rangatiratanga, wairua, dignity, privacy, health and concerns of people are central to service delivery.
- 1.4 Provide services in a fair and equitable manner ensuring people are included in decision making.

[\(OTBNZ, Code of Ethics, January 2022, p. 5\)](#)

When using electronic communication and/or any form of social media with people receiving whakaora ngangahau occupational therapy services, occupational therapists must be aware of the risks this can present.

Kaiwhakaora ngangahau shall:

- Ensure the method of communication is appropriate for the person receiving the service. This includes considering the person's digital ability, digital access, preferred language, and cultural preferences.
- Ensure they are familiar with employer guidelines or requirements that apply when contacting people using forms of electronic communication or social media.
- Ensure the privacy of clients is respected and adheres to the [Health Information Privacy Code 2020](#). Aotearoa New Zealand is a small country where many connections exist.
 - It is a breach of privacy to publicly publish any information (e.g., text, videos, or images) that may lead to a person's identification. This includes information such as nicknames, room number, symptoms, or condition. Be aware that individual posts when put together may lead to identification of the person.
 - Communication platforms used should be assessed to ensure privacy and protection from inadvertent viewing.
 - Be aware that the tagging of people receiving services in social media may be considered a privacy breach where others are able to view the information.
 - Consider how to obtain consent when sharing sensitive information where platforms may be shared with other friends or family members.
- Consider how online interactions are stored as part of the person's clinical record.
- Ensure all electronic resources provided are relevant, up to date, and appropriate for the client.
- Inform the person of when information on the platform is checked and responded to. Urgent information should not be shared in a platform where information

delays and filters may mean it is not received in a timely manner by either the person or kaiwhakaora ngangahau.

- Maintain professional boundaries. Kaiwhakaora ngangahau should not form personal or intimate online relationships with people and whānau they provide services to, even after the service has concluded. Refer to the [Professional Boundaries for occupational therapists](#) guide for more information.
- Be aware of cybersecurity measures and ensure that accounts, password, and information are protected from unauthorised access or use.

Case study

A healthcare assistant was found to have breached the code of patient rights after sharing photos of a client on social media in order to keep up their 'Snapchat streak'. The assistant took photos of a dementia client in a rest home and shared these with their friends on Snapchat.

The Health and Disability Commissioner (HDC) found the healthcare assistant failed to treat the client with respect, which breached Right 1(1) and Right (3) of the code.

The assistant lost their job and had to apologise to the client and their family.

Case study

A registered health professional failed to maintain professional boundaries and had an inappropriate relationship with a client.

The relationship occurred in person, but also via text. While some of the text messages were of a professional nature, the messages also included those of an intimate and sexualised nature as the relationship progressed. Intimate photographs were also sent to the client.

An investigation into the relationship was conducted by the employer and the HDC. The health professional is no longer employed and has indicated they will not return to practice.

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Relationships with communities and people who may require occupational therapy services

As an occupational therapist, you shall:

- 2.1 Accurately represent your skills and competencies.
- 2.2 Ensure your fee structure, if any, is fair and clearly communicated in accessible formats.

[\(OTBNZ, Code of Ethics, January 2022, p. 5\)](#)

When interacting with the community and potential clients, kaiwhakaora ngangahau shall:

- Ensure the title of occupational therapist and New Zealand Registered Occupational Therapist (NZROT) are only used for registered kaiwhakaora ngangahau who hold a current practising certificate. Further information about the [use of occupational therapy titles](#) is available from the Boards website.
- When communicating online, appropriately identify yourself and any conflicts of interest or influential roles you may have.
 - Be clear when information represents personal opinions, organisational opinions, or is advertising.
- When maintaining a website or information source for people, it is recommended that:
 - it is appropriately monitored
 - information is current and not misleading in any way
 - the information is protected from hacking and other cyber threats
 - guidance for contributors and standards of content are included.
- Carefully consider and adhere to consent, privacy codes and human rights when using photos or tagging photos, especially those of young or vulnerable people.
- Avoid using identifiable case studies or case discussions without appropriate consent.
- Be aware that you may be identified as a kaiwhakaora ngangahau from other sources, even if this information is not included in the particular post or article.
- Be aware that content others share about you privately may potentially become publicly visible and may influence how you are perceived by others.

Advertising of services

Online advertising for therapeutic services and products must comply with the [Therapeutic and Health Advertising Code](#). This applies regardless of the platform that it is on and includes websites, advertorials, and social media advertising. Any online advertisements should observe a high standard of social responsibility particularly as people rely on such products, devices and services for their health and well-being¹

- Ensure that any therapeutic claims made are backed by evidence.
- It is recommended that client testimonials or before/after images are avoided as these may provide a false expectation of results.

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Relationships with colleagues and the profession

As an occupational therapist, you shall:

- 3.1 Identify and report any breach of this Code of Ethics to the Occupational Therapy Board of New Zealand for further consideration. This includes concerns about another therapist's practice or conduct.
- 3.2 Practise within the boundaries of your experience, training and competence.
- 3.3 Support the maintenance of occupational therapy standards of practice.
- 3.4 Not bring the profession or other health practitioners into disrepute.
- 3.5 Acknowledge and respect other colleagues, professionals and peers.
- 3.6 Encourage your work organisation/health system to enhance the provision of health services to address equity and sustainability issues.

[\(OTBNZ, Code of Ethics, January 2022, p. 5\)](#)

When relating to their peers, colleagues, and the profession, kaiwhakaora ngangahau shall:

- Be professional and respectful to their employer, colleagues and other health providers in all communications or posts.
- Ensure that dissatisfaction with colleagues or services is expressed appropriately, particularly where other avenues exist to address issues.
- Report to the appropriate authority where the conduct of others may indicate a risk of harm to the public or bring the profession into disrepute.
- Be aware that personal online behaviour can impact on their role and perception as a health practitioner.
- Be aware that information shared by electronic means may be widely passed on to others, even if the original information was private, and that once shared, the information is almost impossible to recover.

- Be aware that racism, bullying or other forms of hate speech are not acceptable by a registered health practitioner and may lead to disciplinary action.

Case study

A registered health professional made offensive and/or inappropriate and/or derogatory comments about Māori on a public Facebook page. They accused Māori nurses of being lazy, dishonest, and unprofessional.

The health professional was referred to the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal who found them guilty of misconduct and bringing the profession into disrepute. They were fined and their registration was cancelled.

A note on dis- and misinformation

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the role of electronic communication and social media in sharing dis- and misinformation wider than was previously possible. The standing of health professionals in the community means that the spread of this kind of information can endanger public health, undermine the quality of care, and damage the reputation of the health profession.

Kaiwhakaora ngangahau should ensure that any information they are sharing is from reputable sources and is supported by evidence. This can include information that is shared in a private capacity that has the potential to be damaging if shared more widely. The spread of dis- or misinformation has been regarded as a disciplinary offence by regulators in New Zealand.

Case study

A nurse lost their job at the DHB after making anti-vaccination and other posts on their Facebook page. The dismissal was later upheld by the Employment Relations Authority. Although the posts were on their private page it was ruled that there was a significant risk of harm to the reputation of the DHB if their postings were made public.

Case study

A doctor was investigated and censured by the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal in part for making claims about treatments and their expertise that were not backed by evidence. The doctor was suspended by the Medical Council and is not currently practising.

Other sources of information

Office of the Privacy Commissioner

[Privacy Act 2020- Health Information Privacy Code 2020](#)

Advertising Standards Authority

[Therapeutic and Health Advertising Code](#) and [guidance notes](#)

Association of New Zealand Advertisers

[Therapeutic advertising pre-vetting service](#)

[Health and Disability Commissioner \(Code of Health and Disability Services Consumers' Rights\) Regulations 1996](#)

[Health \(Retention of Health Information\) Regulations 1996](#)

References

Ventola C. L. (2014). [Social media and health care professionals: benefits, risks, and best practices](#). *P & T : a peer-reviewed journal for formulary management*, 39(7), 491–520.

Federation of State Medical Boards (2022) [Professional expectations regarding medical misinformation and disinformation](#)

AHPRA and National Boards (2020) [Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service](#)