



Social media use by registered dietitians and pre-registration dietetic students in the UK and Ireland

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Social media, whereby users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content such as photographs and videos, has become a defining feature of the internet today with 63 % of adults in the UK engaging with social media (SM) daily and 51 % of web users accessing internet based health information⁽¹⁾. Health professionals including dietitians have previously identified the importance of SM in the provision of quality health information for the public although less than ten percent were actively engaged in it for this purpose⁽²⁾. Studies of students enrolled in health care profession programmes have shown them to be high users of SM, however the predominant use in this group is personal rather than educational or professional^(3,4). Despite the rise in the use of SM to access health information and support, and the potential benefits and disadvantages to more active engagement by health professionals in this media, there has not been a comprehensive study of SM use by dietitians or student dietitians.

Informed by professional documents and literature, an online survey was developed and distributed to registered dietitians (RD) and student dietitians (SD) across the UK and Ireland. Questions were closed multiple choice and five-point Likert scale covering: demographic information; social media use; privacy and professionalism; opportunities, barriers and concerns about social media in dietetic practice. Means and percentages were calculated to estimate uptake and use.

1005 responses were received: 753 RDs (8.5 % of 8902 RDs in the UK and Ireland) and 252 SDs (15 % of 1672 SDs studying dietetics). The majority (68 %) were from England; others were from Republic of Ireland (14 %), Scotland (9 %), Northern Ireland (6 %) and Wales (4 %). 80 % of RDs and 96 % of SDs considered themselves users of SM. Overall 52 % used SM for personal reasons alone, but 45 % of SDs used SM for educational purposes and 41 % of RDs used it for professional reasons. Whilst 36 % of respondents were concerned that SM use by dietitians could undermine the public's confidence in the profession, the majority (66 %) agreed that it is important that dietitians engage with SM to promote the profession.

Registered dietitians are engaging with SM in their personal and professional lives. Student dietitians are very high users of SM. Inappropriate use of social media may have negative implications for the profession. Guidance and training should be further developed to ensure the opportunities are maximised and that risks are managed.

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