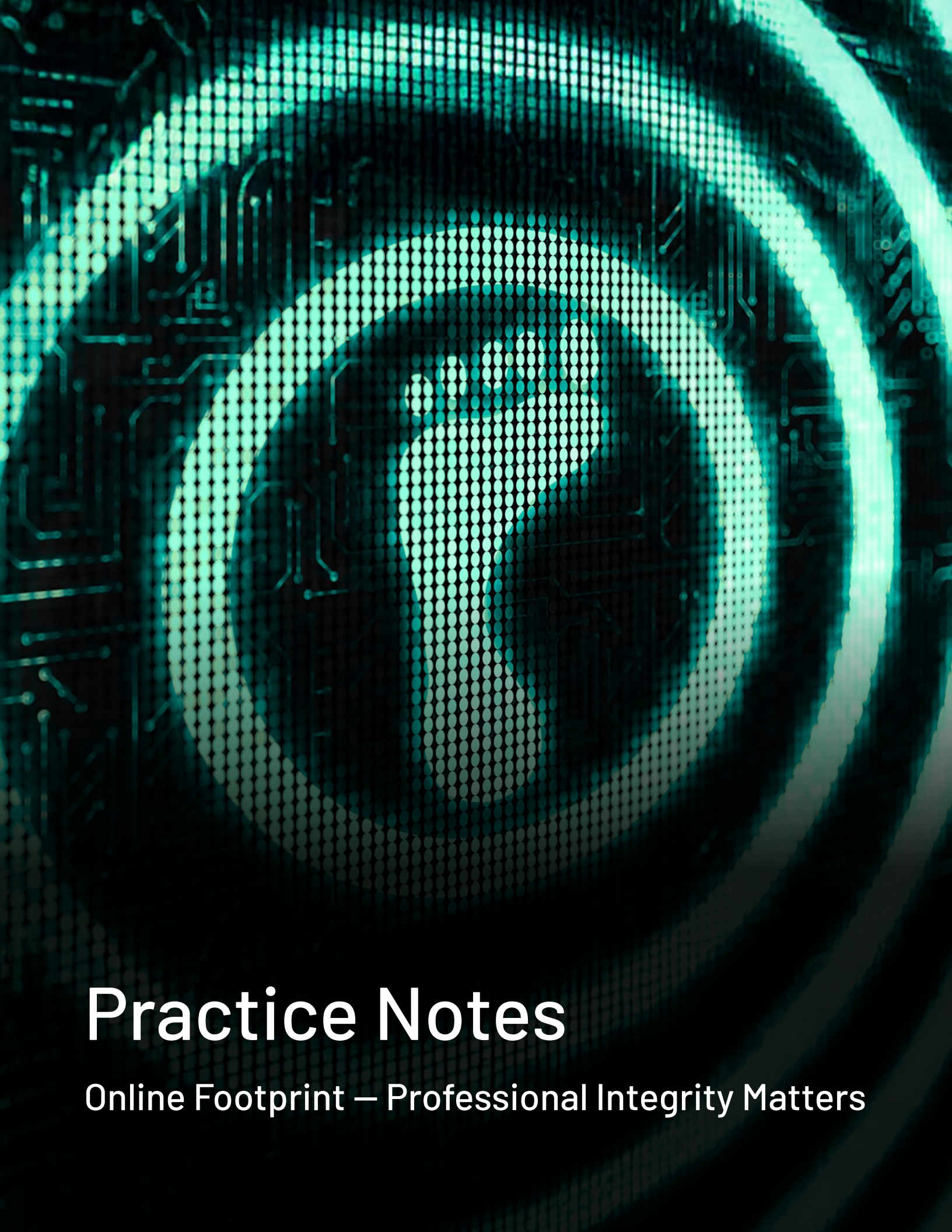


# Practice Notes

## Online Footprint — Professional Integrity Matters

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**Practice Notes is an educational tool designed to help Ontario social workers, social service workers, employers and members of the public gain a better understanding of recurring issues dealt with by the College's Professional Practice Department and Complaints Committee that may affect everyday practice. The notes offer general guidance only and College registrants[1] with specific practice inquiries should consult the College, since the relevant standards and appropriate course of action will vary depending on the situation.**

Being a professional social worker or social service worker is a privilege that comes with significant responsibility. It is earned through commitment, education, and ongoing dedication to ethical practice. The opinions and recommendations of registrants carry influence because they are rooted in recognized expertise. As such, when identifying themselves by their professional title or designation, registrants are held to a higher standard than individuals who are not registrants, or registrants who are acting solely in their personal capacity and without associating themselves with or identifying themselves by their professional title or designation. They are expected to uphold the values of the profession and demonstrate professionalism when representing themselves in public as registrants. In short, a registrant cannot speak as a member of a regulated profession without taking responsibility for the risk of harm that flows from speaking in that trusted capacity.

At times, registrants may believe an opinion they share is portrayed as personal rather than professional; this is particularly common on social media and other online platforms. However, when a registrant associates their professional title or designation with their own personal views online, the public may interpret those statements as professional opinions, grounded in the values and evidence base of the social work or social service work professions. In addition, the opinions expressed and the language used to express them may harm public trust and confidence in the profession. Actions of members of a profession in their private lives may in some cases be relevant to and have an impact on their professional lives – including where the conduct is not consistent with the core values of a profession and/or where there is a need for a regulated profession to maintain confidence of the public in the profession and not be seen to condone certain types of conduct by its members.

Similarly, when sharing content related to their private life, such as photos, videos or personal reflections, registrants must consider whether they are identifiable as a College registrant. If so, the content may be perceived differently by the public and held to a higher standard than if it were shared by someone without a professional designation.

Consider the following scenarios as they relate to registrants and online professionalism.

### Scenario 1 — Social Media Etiquette

*Upon searching for a registrant online, a client discovered an unlocked and unrestricted social media account belonging to the registrant in question. The client contacted the Professional Practice Department because the account included pictures of the registrant that the client described as "provocative". Initially the client thought they found the wrong person, but then saw they identified themselves as a College registrant. The client felt uncomfortable seeing the photos and wanted to know if this was a common or acceptable practice for College registrants.*

Professional Practice staff validated the client's concerns. Photos of this nature could be disconcerting for clients to find on a registrant's social media page. Staff explained to the client that all College registrants are required to practise according to *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*, which outline the minimum

[1]Disclaimer: the term "member" and "registrant" are used interchangeably and synonymously as equivalent to the term "member" as used in the *Social Work and Social Service Work Act, 1998*, and the Regulations.

requirements of professional and ethical practice. Staff referred to Principle II: Competence and Integrity, which states that "College registrants shall avoid conduct in their social work or social service work practice which could reasonably be perceived as reflecting negatively on the professions of social work or social service work."[2] Additionally, the Code of Ethics requires that a "College registrant does not provide services in a manner that diminishes the public's trust or discredits the professions."[3]

Staff discussed with the client that registrants are free to share personal photos and messages online, and while it did not appear services were being provided through the registrant's social media platform, registrants should be cautious when referencing their professional status online. Specifically, if content shared could be viewed as inappropriate by clients or the public, linking it to a professional title or designation may negatively impact the perception of the profession. The client was informed that College registrants are expected to maintain professionalism at all times and should avoid identifying themselves using their professional designation or title when posting content that could be perceived as unprofessional or inappropriate.

## Scenario 2 — Respectful Advocacy

*A registrant contacted the Professional Practice Department to state that they were offended by content another registrant posted online. Professional Practice staff were informed that a registrant who identifies themselves online using their professional designation, used an online platform to advocate violence against a specific group of people. The registrant who called the College wanted to report this behaviour as they felt it was unprofessional and against the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice.*

During the practice consultation, Professional Practice staff referenced the Standards of Practice, which state:

> College registrants shall not discriminate against anyone, including but not limited to on the basis of citizenship, race, place of origin, national or ethnic origin, language, colour, ancestry, creed, sex (including pregnancy), family status, marital status, genetic characteristics, religion, worldview, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, age, class, social-economic status or ability.[4]

Staff also explained that registrants are required to "adhere to the *Ontario Human Rights Code*, the *Canada Human Rights Act*, and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, where applicable, in the provision of services"[5] and "be aware of and reflect upon their values, attitudes, assumptions and biases and how these impact their professional relationships with clients."[6]

Over the course of the practice consultation, it was acknowledged that registrants are entitled to hold personal views and express them. However, when using their professional title or designation, College registrants are expected to uphold professional standards. As outlined in the Standards of Practice, "College registrants shall conduct themselves professionally, behaving at all times with civility, respect and fairness toward others, while respecting diversity of opinion and differences in perspective."[7]

The practice consultation also included a discussion about the role of advocacy as a core value within the social work and social service work professions. The Code of Ethics states that "[a] College registrant advocates for social justice, the overall benefit of society, the environment and the global community."[8] It was emphasized by staff that promoting or condoning violence is incompatible with the standards of the profession and that registrants are expected to engage in respectful advocacy and expression. The registrant asked if they were required to report these actions to the College. It was explained that it was not mandatory to make a report in this instance, although the registrant was welcome to make a report to the College if they chose to do so.

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[2]Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2.12.
[3]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Code of Ethics, interpretation 8.
[4]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle III: Responsibility to Clients, interpretation 3.1.
[5]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle III: Responsibility to Clients, interpretation 3.2.
[6]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle I: Relationship with Clients, interpretation 1.7.
[7]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2.13.
[8]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Code of Ethics, interpretation 11.

## Scenario 3 — Professional Competence

*A client contacted the Professional Practice Department regarding a registrant they work with who demonstrates a regular presence online. The registrant posts content about how to support mental health; however, the client was surprised by information found on the registrant's website about the dangers of taking antidepressants. Instead, the registrant promoted following a specific diet to support mental health. The client was shocked by these claims as they found antidepressants to be a helpful tool in dealing with mental health challenges. They also thought College registrants should not comment on the use of medication and wondered if this was appropriate professional behaviour.*

The Scopes of Practice for social workers and social service workers were discussed with the client, and Professional Practice staff explained that providing professional opinions on the efficacy of medication or specific diets was not in scope for either profession. College registrants do not have the education, training or competence to make recommendations about medication or how a specific diet may or may not treat illness. Registrants must be mindful that any recommendations or guidance shared through a professional platform carries weight, given their status as registered professionals. "College registrants shall recognize that they are in a position of power and responsibility to all clients and that they are responsible for ensuring that clients are protected from the abuse of such power during and after the provision of professional services."[9] Clients are more likely to believe comments and endorsements from registrants due to their position of power and privilege, and registrants must be conscientious about how they use this level of influence.

This highlights the important expectation that "College registrants shall be responsible for being aware of the extent and parameters of their competence and their professional scope of practice and limit their practice accordingly."[10] When registrants provide services or make recommendations outside their scope of practice or area of competence, particularly without support from a credible body of evidence, they risk causing harm to clients and the public.

Professional Practice staff also explained that the Standards of Practice state, "College registrants shall ensure that any professional recommendations or opinions they provide are supported by evidence and a credible body of professional social work or social service work knowledge."[11] In this context, staff clarified to the client that making claims about medication and diet extends beyond the recognized scope of practice for social work and social service work. Furthermore, registrants are not permitted to make unsubstantiated claims. While the efficacy of antidepressants is well-researched and supported by a substantial body of evidence, specific diets, while they may contribute to overall well-being, have not undergone the same level of rigorous, evidence-based evaluation.

## Conclusion

All registrants have a responsibility to uphold professional integrity and reputation. The public can be harmed if a registrant shares inaccurate information or engages in inappropriate behaviour. It can also negatively impact the public's perception and willingness to engage with social work and social service work services. Registrants share a collective responsibility to uphold the profession's integrity, both in person and online. When using professional titles on social media or public platforms, posts may be seen as representing the profession. Maintaining professionalism through online content helps preserve public trust and supports a positive perception of social work and social service work, encouraging individuals to seek and engage with these vital services.

If you have questions about this issue or want to discuss further, please contact the Professional Practice Department at practice@ocswssw.org or book a professional practice consult.

[9]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.2.
[10]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.1.1.
[11]OCSWSSW, *The Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, Third Edition, 2023*, Principle II: Competence and Integrity, interpretation 2.1.7.