

Dating App Guidance for Doctors and Dentists in Training

HEENE Guidance 2023





1. Background

All Doctors and Dentists lead busy lives with hectic schedules. This can impact detrimentally on their social and romantic lives and is more likely to impact on younger colleagues.

Over the past decade, apps have transformed the dating landscape, and they offer a convenient and accessible way for Doctors and Dentists in Training (DDiTs) to meet new people and form relationships.

However, the prominence of dating apps does pose unique challenges that are worthy of consideration. As with most social media platforms, there is blurring of the lines between a doctor's personal and professional persona, and there is difficulty in balancing the rights of individuals to express themselves, reassuring patients who might be met socially, either online or in person, and the requirement to uphold the principles outlined in GMC guidance.

Conduct on dating apps is a distinct and nuanced entity which is not encompassed as part of the BMA's^{1,2} and GMC's³ social media guidance. In this document we will consider appropriate conduct of doctors on dating apps and highlight pitfalls to avoid.



Issues with doctor's conduct on dating apps have been investigated by the GMC



2. Guidance

Aims

The aim of this document is to provide guidance on an aspect of DDiT's personal lives that can have significant professional ramifications. The aim isn't to provide an extensive list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, but rather to provide a set of guiding principles that will ensure that DDiT's conduct on dating apps aligns with GMC/GDC standards.

Guidance Development

A working group of doctors in training performed a literature review, and examined existing BMA, GMC and GDC guidance. A draft guidance was produced and presented at the regional Trainee Executive Forum. Feedback was obtained and appropriate amendments were made.

The GMC guidance found in *Good Medical Practice*⁴ and *Maintaining Professional Boundaries*⁵ form the foundation of this guidance, however, this aligns with the GDC's *Standards for the Dental Team*¹⁰, as such this guidance can apply equally to dentists in training.

The American Medical Association⁶ recommends that doctors separate professional and personal content online. However, when identifying as a DDiT on a dating app, guidance states that the standards expected of the individual are the same as those that would be expected in a face-to-face interaction.



You must make sure your conduct justifies your patient's trust in you and the public's trust in the profession

DDiTs should not misrepresent themselves and they should identify themselves by name, as they must be prepared to justify their conduct.

Trust

In the GMC's *Good Medical Practice*⁴ (GDC: Principle 9)¹⁰, it is stated that: **"You must make sure your conduct justifies your patients' trust in you and the public's trust in the profession"**. What constitutes content that will breach patient's and the public's trust is subjective and will vary from person to person, as such it would be assessed on a case-by-case basis. It is beyond the scope of this guidance to comment on specific examples of potentially inappropriate conduct, that could risk bringing the profession into disrepute, but it is best to proceed with caution and common sense.

A good rule of thumb is that if you wouldn't be happy for your personal content, including images, to be in the public domain, be this via online social media platforms or other means, do not post it on your dating profile.

Doctor-Patient Partnership

The GMC is explicit in its Maintaining Professional Boundaries guidance⁵. It states that **“You must not use your professional position to pursue a sexual or improper relationship with a patient or someone close to them”**.



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Current Patients

A current patient is any individual that you are directly or indirectly involved in the delivery of their healthcare. It is never appropriate to pursue a sexual or improper emotional relationship with a current patient.

Former Patients

Personal relationships with a former patient may also be inappropriate depending on factors such as:

- Timing – length since, and duration of professional relationship
- Vulnerability of individual (current & whilst a patient)
- Nature of previous professional relationship
- Whether you are currently caring for other family member

If you are unsure if you are (or could be) abusing your professional position, you should seek advice from an impartial colleague, your defense body or your medical association. Full guidance can be found by following the link below:

<https://www.gmc-uk.org/ethical-guidance/ethical-guidance-for-doctors/maintaining-a-professional-boundary-between-you-and-your-patient/maintaining-a-professional-boundary-between-you-and-your-patient>

Doctors and dentists are often seen as being in positions of power and care must be taken to ensure that any online relationship does not exploit those who might be vulnerable.

If a connection is made with a patient, it should be politely stated that you cannot mix social and professional relationships and no further communications should be made.

Privacy

No dating platform can ensure complete privacy, once content is posted to a dating profile it should be considered in the public domain. The content posted on

dating apps has the potential to negatively affect a DDIT's reputation amongst patients and colleagues. Almost all dating apps work with geolocation using smartphone GPS⁷, as such, there is an increased risk of nearby colleagues and patients accessing personal profiles and establishing inappropriate communications. **To reduce the risk of unintentional connections, dating apps should not be accessed whilst in work. We also recommend that DDIT's are familiar with their local trust's policies relating to phone usage at work.**

Confidentiality

In the GMC's *Good Medical Practice*³ (GDC: Principle 4)¹⁰ it is stated that **“when speaking publicly...you must maintain patient confidentiality, ...communications intended for friends and family may become more widely available”**. This guidance applies in the context of communicating on dating platforms. Understandably, dating apps offer an illusion of privacy, but comments made on dating platforms should be considered to be in the public domain and doctor-patient confidentiality must be maintained.

Legal Considerations

In August 2022, the UK Government passed new laws relating to the sending of explicit images⁹.

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/cps-sets-out-law-street-based-sexual-harassment>

Cyberflashing is the act of sending unsolicited explicit images to people via social media or dating apps and is a criminal offence that can result in a maximum prison sentence of two years. It is not the intention of this guidance to transgress boundaries into the private lives of DDITs, however, there have been a number of examples of GMC investigations relating to DDITs conduct on dating apps, and with reference to the

existing legal precedent, it is recommended that individuals should be aware of the legal implications if they are considering sharing explicit images as part of online dating.

Sexting is the act of sending sexual messages, often including nude and explicit videos of yourself. Sexting is not exclusive to dating apps but does occur on dating platforms. Sending explicit images with consent is not a criminal offence, however, there are potential risks of sexting with someone you don't know or trust, as these could be distributed more widely and viewed by individuals without your permission. There is also the risk that a third party can hack either you, or your sexting partner's device and leak the data⁸.

To avoid these unwanted consequences:

- **Avoid sexting if possible. If you do sext, only do so with people you know and trust**
- **Establish rules about sending and deleting images before you start, as sending unsolicited images is a criminal offence.**
- **Avoid having your face in explicit images**
- **Delete explicit content from digital trash bins and cloud storage.**

DiT's experience of dating apps

I am a 32-year-old female doctor in training with a profile on three dating apps. I have used dating apps on and off for four years.

I have intermittently identified myself as a doctor on my profile. The reason for including doctor on my profile, if I do, is to reduce the number of people who make negative comments when I tell them what I do. These negative comments are generally along the lines of 'oh you must have lots of money', or about privilege, or being above others. By including doctor on my profile, I don't get these comments from matches.

I have a selection of photos on my profile that I would not be concerned about if they were shared on twitter or in the press if someone was to do this. They include photos of me hiking, paddle boarding, with a pet, and dressed up in clothes I would wear out for dinner.

Top Tips for Staying Safe Online

- 1 Think carefully about the amount of detail you make available online
- 2 Don't post anything on your profile that you wouldn't want posted on social medial platforms
- 3 Don't abuse your status as a doctor or dentist
- 4 Avoid sexting if possible. If you do sext, only do so with people you know and trust
- 5 Avoid having your face in explicit images
- 6 Establish rules about sending and deleting content before starting sexting
- 7 Delete content from trash bins and online clouds
- 8 Avoid the use of dating apps whilst at work
- 9 Don't mix social and professional relationships with patients
- 10 Don't breach patient confidentiality

I ensure I communicate with matches with the same level of kindness and respect that I would communicate with family, friends, and colleagues, regardless of how those matches might speak to me. I ensure I do not say anything or behave in any way that would bring the profession into disrepute and in fact often get the comment from people who haven't ever met or dated doctors that I am more balanced and down to earth than they thought I would be, which I hope positively impacts on the view of the profession.

I think doctors and dentists on dating apps do need to ensure they maintain the same level of behaviour they would day to day. They need to be aware of the risks that come with dating apps of profiles being publicly available and images and/or conversations being screenshotted and shared widely, and the impact this could have on their career and the profession.

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