

## **Dr. Alexander Holden - Where does dentistry fit in the social media landscape?**

Chiraz: Hello and welcome to CDA Oasis. As a dentist, you walk a fine line when you step in the social media arena and you quickly find out that what separates your personal life from your professional one, are sometimes few words that you type into your status. More importantly, for you as a professional, what constitutes ethical conduct becomes the mere subjective interpretation of what you post on your social media feed. Still, the issue is far more multidimensional than a simple status update. Although social media is widely used, it is still a powerful tool with a lot of unknowns waiting to be clarified around issues such as the extent of information sharing, the right to privacy, consent to posting content, brand marketing ethics, etc. Social media was the topic of conversation at the most recent research conference of the International Association of Dental Research in London, England. And, we have invited a panelist to a session that dealt with the trickles of social media on dentistry. Dr. Alexander Holden is Lecturer in Dental Ethics, Law and Professionalism at the University of Sydney, from where he joins me today. Dr. Holden, thank you very much for agreeing to do the interview, I know it's a bit late where you are, and welcome to this Oasis conversation.

Dr. Holden: Thank you very much for having me.

Chiraz: So, your session that I had is titled Social Media in Dentistry, professional and ethical issues. Although the title is very clear, I was wondering if you could, for the sake of our audience, tell us what the session is about.

Dr. Holden: So, it was myself, Dr Allison Patrick at the University of Sheffield in the UK and Dr. Patricia Neville at the University of Bristol in the UK. And then myself and my Dean and head of school at the University of Sydney Heiko Spallek. We were talking about really some of the issues that haven't really been explored too well with social media and really, I think we were focusing on the main issue for us is whether or not social media is public or private. And obviously when you're a professional and you're interacting on social media, when you post something as a dental professional can it really damage your professionalism.

Chiraz: So, in this era of online exposure, and I mean exposure in every meaning of the word, can professionals really claim the right to a private life?

Dr. Holden: I think many of our colleagues would probably argue that they would like to think of themselves as having a private life. And certainly, I think the right to a private life is everybody's entitlement. I think what people have to remember though is that when you post something on social media it doesn't really matter whether it's public or private, or in a closed group, a secret group, you're only ever a one click away from being shared. It just takes one person to take a screenshot to share what you've posted and that's instantly in the public arena. And I think that has to be remembered when we're sort of talking about private posts on social media because it doesn't really matter what your intention was and your intended audience because it really is out of your

control once you've posted it. So, whilst I respect everybody's right to a private life, I think when it comes to social media, the definition of private becomes very flimsy.

Chiraz: In your opinion, what constitutes professional ethical conduct in relation to social media?

Dr. Holden: That's an interesting question because when you look at the literature of how do we define electronic professionalism or e-professionalism, often the definitions talk about essentially doing everything that you would do offline but online, and I think that's fair enough as a starting point, but I wonder if it really gets far enough into the nature of social media or is it really opening up that perhaps their more private world. The things that we would typically maybe have done behind closed doors that yes, we probably all knew wasn't okay and we wouldn't want our patients and the public to know about, but essentially, they would never find out doing it online sort of opens that up and really means that it's no longer private. So, I think we have to be very, very mindful and I think it probably does hold us to a slightly higher standard in terms of you know, how we act.

Chiraz: Can we say today that we fully grasp the consequences, intended and otherwise, of using social media on dentistry?

Dr. Holden: So, I think that question probably requires a slightly broader answer because I think as a society we're not quite sure about social media, so therefore I think it's definitely the case that in dentistry and medicine, the other healthcare professions we just don't know necessarily where the boundaries or the parameters are yet because I don't think society's really worked it out. I mean when we think that Facebook only established itself in 2004, it's still a very young technology and it's still a very young disruption to the way we do our social business as a society. So, I think to say that dentistry or any other health profession is somehow special or different would perhaps be maybe slightly too narrow in focus and I think we have to view it as being a societal issue that we're still exploring. And you just think about the amount of online guidance that's now aimed at children, for example. In some ways dentistry needs something similar.

Chiraz: The question that I asked you right now is actually a two way street. So, are dentists also sometimes victims of what's posted about them online and on social media and I can think of, for example, you know, shaming as an example that goes around a lot, exposing dentists. Taking pictures or recording a conversation with a dentist and then going on social media and putting it out there.

Dr. Holden: This extends out, which is a question about professionalism. As a dental professional, as a dentist or indeed as a doctor, how should you react when you are shamed or defamed even by patients either online or maybe even the old fashion press. We have different attitudes towards that depending on where we look in the UK, where I was raised professionally the indemnifiers would always say, you know, if you have somebody write something about you in the paper or online you don't engage with it because to acknowledge it is to acknowledge that they are a patient and you're somehow then

breaching confidentiality requirements. You're sort of lowering yourself from your professional status. Where I am now in Australia, it's a slightly different attitude from society's point of view where we've had several high-profile cases, one of the dentist an orthopedic surgeon who actually sued their patient for defamation when they were writing things about them both on social media and generally online.

Dr. Holden: So, I think it depends on where you are. I don't know exactly what the social climate is like in Canada. I mean from my own personal point of view, I think we are vulnerable in society as members of the dental professional, we attract attention from people from the public and sometimes we're going to attract the wrong sorts of people who perhaps set out to be vindictive or vexatious. I certainly would counter that comment though with the fact that I think that that's very much the minority of people who we look after. I think we have to moderate any response that we have with the full knowledge that regardless of what's being said about us, we are very privileged and powerful members of society as dentists and I think on that basis we do have to be very mindful about how we respond. So, I mean, it's very easy for me in an ivory tower having never been slammed or defamed by a patient to say how I might react and therefore I probably won't go down that path. I certainly would sympathize with anyone who's been in that position, but how we react certainly could have real implications for our professionalism and wouldn't it be terrible if I'm trying to sort something out and trying to make a bad situation better, we actually made it worse.

Chiraz: So, in your presentation you speak about the sharing of anonymized photos of patients online using Facebook, Facebook professional groups or other social media platforms and I recall once listening to a very interesting feature by NPR about current technologies that can actually identify these photos that are posted online, such as where and when they were taken actually to the detail of which device and which app was used to take them. In your opinion, what are the limits of content posted by dentists online?

Dr. Holden: Well, absolutely. It's a really good question and I think it's something that again, as a profession we are struggling with slightly. I mean, the first issue is one of terminology because you talk about anonymized photos when actually we probably should be talking about de-identified because let's face it, as you just talked about, there are so many technologies out there but also the fantastic technology of the naked human eye, looking at these pictures and working out who somebody is, you know, everything really potentially can be re-identified. So, I think we have got to be very mindful of that to start with. And I think as a rule of thumb if looking at a picture, a patient themselves would be able to identify from that picture, that that is them they are looking at, then we cannot call that anonymous. That is simply de-identified.

Dr. Holden: And you know, it's funny you know, if you're cool like me and you search online for pictures of celebrities' mouths, you can usually work out who they are. And yes, we're not all celebrities, but our own friends and family we're so well known that it's likely that people who know us well enough can work out who we are from just a picture of

our discombobulated smile. So, I think we've got to be very mindful when we're posting pictures of patient's teeth, their mouths, that actually just because we don't think our colleague from down the street might not know who they are, somebody else looking at the picture might. So, that's the first issue. The second issue is why are we posting that picture? You know, a lot of the content that we see on social media that we see online on the incident, it is really not that helpful from an educational point of view in helping other dentists to understand how we might approach a particular treatment situation.

Dr. Holden: You have certainly the before and after picture. They might be very nice as a vanity shop, but they don't show anything about either the integrity of the work or how you got there in the first place. And certainly, if I'm an aspiring cosmetic dentist and I want to understand from my more learned colleagues how to get a particular outcome, a picture of, you know, something before and after isn't going help you get that. So, I think there's always that question of why are we really posting? And certainly, I've seen some really horrific examples of full-face shots and names as well. This is my patient x, I treated her because she's a lovely lady and she had financial difficulties and aren't I nice for helping. Well first of all, you've just named her, second of all, you've told us more about her social circumstances that you treat for free because she couldn't afford the treatment. And so on, instead of thinking, well actually, this is not supposed to help the patient, this is supposed really for your own self confidence.

Chiraz: It's a very intricate and interesting topic to delve into. Now, I want to oblige on your expertise for a few minutes and ask you if you have any tips or advice that you could share about dentistry and social media.

Dr. Holden: I think the first one is probably not a reflection of any expertise, but probably one more of common sense that I imagine most of the viewers of this would know already, but perhaps forget in the heat of the moment of always thinking before you click post, because once some thing is out that even though you might delete it later, it's still potentially discoverable and I think you've got to always bear in mind in that the split second that it might've been published, someone could have disseminated it further. So, I think that's the first one. I think the second one is always asking questions about why you're posting. What's it saying about our profession? I mean if you open trade magazines in dentistry, you will often find articles related to implants about maybe cosmetic dentistry, facial aesthetics, whitening...sometimes it would be nice to see a little bit more reflection on actual dental disease that our patients suffer with and perhaps that needs to be reflected in some of the content of these professional platforms.

Dr. Holden: It is worth commenting, that dentistry is traditionally a very lonely profession. Often, we can go whole days without speaking to another dentist in our practice, which is very different to other healthcare professionals and sometimes I think people will feel a little less than supported. So, social media is fantastic for professional support and if you can use it for that and get some benefit from that and enrich your professional life, then who am I to say don't use it. I think that would be bad advice. But certainly using it in a

way that explores patient data and in fact exploits patient data for your own benefit is perhaps ethically questionable and I use perhaps there in a very loose sense, I think we can all agree that we shouldn't really be playing fast and loose with that sort of thing. I mean, you know, data is the new oil.

Chiraz: Alright Dr. Holden, you made me think about so many, so many questions and so many other perspectives. Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today and I hope to host you again on Oasis.

Dr. Holden: You're very welcome. Thank you for having me.