

Guidance: Ethical online behaviour

In this guidance document, the Hearing Professional Conduct and Complaints Body (HPCCB) explores how you can behave ethically online when:

- Promoting your own qualifications and experience
- Stating your opinions
- Engaging in debates about professional issues

A separate guidance document by the HPCCB titled 'Unethical online behaviour' reflects on some of the common examples of unethical online behaviour of audiologists and audiometrists raised in calls to the Ethics Officer and complaints to the HPCCB.

You can promote your skills, just not in comparison to others

It is okay to talk about and promote your education, experience and any further education you have undertaken that means you can better meet the needs of your clients.

Where it often becomes problematic is if you begin to contrast your skills and experience to those of others, especially if you are doing so by putting down other people's skills and experience.

Any comment you make on a public forum, including social media, promoting your skills and experience is considered advertising. Standard 8 of the Code of Conduct for audiologists and audiometrists includes specific responsibilities when advertising, including:

8.2 Members must advertise their services in a way that allows the public to make informed choices about their healthcare based on acceptable evidence.

Guidance for practitioners on the use of testimonials in marketing can be found on the HPCCB website.

It's safest to assume that any comment you make in the public sphere is being made in your professional role

It is important to remember that if you are putting yourself forward in any public sphere, including social media, you are doing so as a professional. It is impossible for the public and your clients to disentangle what may be your 'personal' opinions from your 'professional' opinions.

To separate your private and professional online presence, you could consider using a pseudonym for online private social forums. However, even when using a pseudonym, you must refrain from making any public comments about audiology or audiometry that are not in line with the Code of Conduct for audiologists and audiometrists. By publicly commenting on any issue relating to your profession, you are acting in a professional role. This is because your comment would be informed by your professional expertise and experience and will be seen by others and being so.

Standard 7 of the Code of Conduct for audiologists and audiometrists states that 'Members must behave professionally and ethically when interacting in a professional capacity' and includes specific responsibilities relating to online behaviour.

Ethically engaging in debates about professional issues

If you do want to debate a topic online in your professional role, it is important that you have all the facts and a complete understanding of the issues at hand. If this is not the case, you may be found to be in breach of the Code of Conduct for audiologists and audiometrists, including responsibility 7.4b:

- 7.4 Members must promote public understanding of the professions, which include [...]*
- b. Not making any false, misleading or deceptive claims in communications with the public.*

Example- Debating health service regulatory models

One common example of a false and misleading claim in communications with the public is when audiologists and audiometrists claim that hearing services are 'unregulated'. This is factually incorrect as there are a range of regulatory mechanisms in place for the regulation of hearing services in Australia, including self-regulation by the professional bodies, regulation by government funding schemes, regulation by private health insurers, and regulation by the state and territory health and disability services complaints entities.

Publicly stating that hearing services are unregulated is misleading to the public and may even lead to harm as clients with concerns may incorrectly interpreting this as meaning there is nowhere for them to receive support or make a complaint. It is therefore a breach of responsibility 7.4 above.

In contrast, you are able enter into a public debate about the different possible regulatory models for hearing services, as long as the statements you make are factually correct and do not mislead the public. This may include factually correct statements criticising the self-regulatory model, or other regulatory mechanisms.

If you are unsure if you do completely understand the complex regulatory system around hearing services in Australia, it is safest to refrain from commenting in a public forum. However, you can have private conversations with your peers. You can also write to your professional body or to the Ethics Officer.