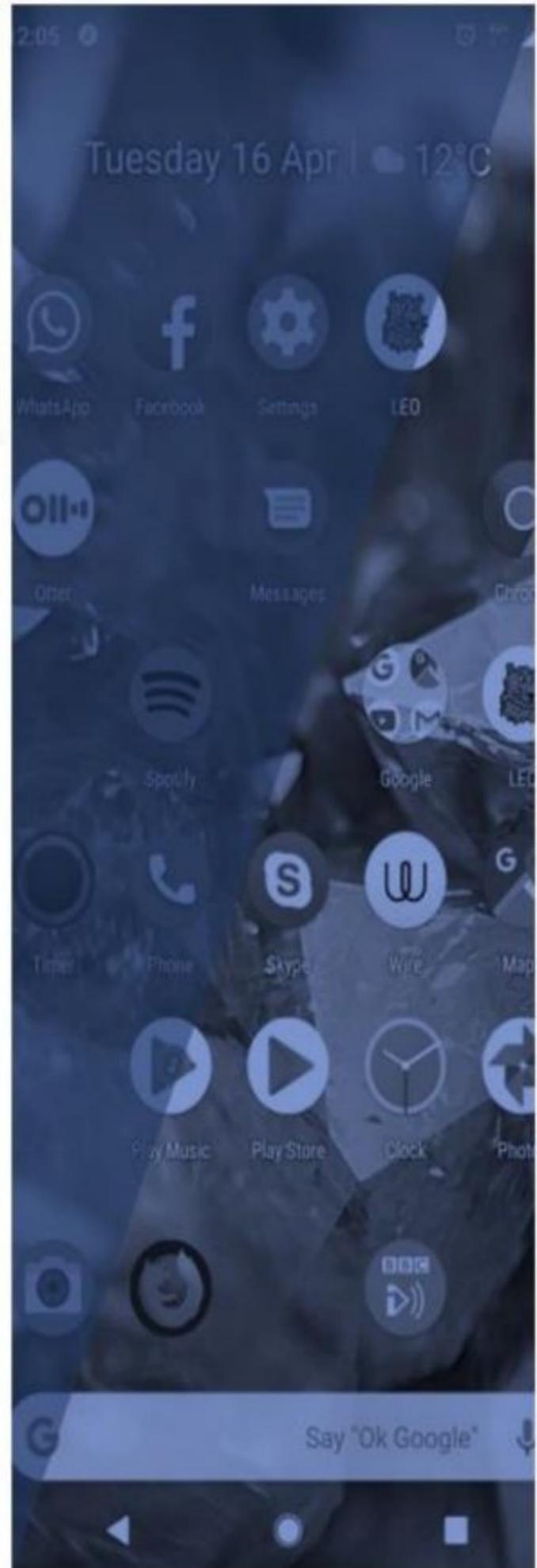


# Guidelines for the Professional Use of Mobile Phones and Social Media

For Zambian Nurses and Midwives

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(GNCZ)



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The Zambian  
**Ministry of Health**

## Foreword

The General Nursing Council of Zambia (GNCZ) is a statutory body established through the enactment of Nurses and Midwifery Act No 31, of 1997. One of the mandates of the Council is to regulate Nursing and Midwifery education and practice. In its quest and commitment to achieving its mandate, the GNCZ has developed guidelines for the professional use of mobile phones and other mobile and social media platforms.

Mobile and social media platforms are highly popular among Nurses and Midwives in Zambia. Although research evidence reveals considerable benefits from the use of these applications, they also give rise to significant challenges and risks. Some Nurses and Midwives may assume that what they do on their mobile applications on the handsets (phones) does not concern their client or even their employer, and yet Nurses' careers may be put at risk if they use mobile or social media inappropriately.

The misuse of these applications can have a negative effect and compromise client confidentiality and security. In the same way, ill-informed social media use can jeopardise a Nurse's / Midwife's registration and damage individual careers. It may also cause harm to the entire profession due to legal problems for Nurses and Midwives that involve privacy litigations, questionable moral character and questionable ethics. This is what prompted the GNCZ in collaboration with the University of Zambia and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland to develop these guidelines, with funding from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

The guidelines are aimed at protecting the privacy and confidentiality of both the client and the Nurse and Midwife and avoid distractions in the provision of nursing care. In addition, the guidelines will serve to promote respectful service and to prevent disregard for clients, and, in the same way, support Nurses in preventing misinformation spread on social media.

It is my sincere hope that these guidelines will help in facilitating the professional use of mobile phones and social media among nurses and midwives, so that they avoid common pitfalls and foster professional connections for positive client outcomes.

Lonina Mwape, Lusaka, 29 May 2019  
(Director - Nursing Services, MoH)

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## Acknowledgements

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## Introduction

Mobile phones and social media, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, are highly popular among Nurses and Midwives in Zambia and are widely used for professional purposes. Although research found that there are considerable benefits for nurses and midwives linked to the use of these apps, they also give rise to significant challenges and risks. The ill-informed use of these apps has negatively affected client confidentiality, security, and safety and it has damaged individual careers and caused harm to the entire profession.

In response to these issues, the General Nursing Council of Zambia has developed the following guidelines, which are centred on three broad principles:

- Protect privacy and confidentiality
- Avoid distraction and client disregard
- Fight misinformation
- Separate personal and professional use
- Use digital groups responsibly for professional purposes

These principles should help Nurses and Midwives to successfully navigate the new world of digital professionalism. However, the guidelines cover many, but not all, situations and in the light of the complexity and the changing nature of digital media, every Nurse and Midwife is cautioned to apply due diligence in the specific situations that they encounter.

### Supporting e-tutorial

The key content of these guidelines can be learned via a short interactive online tutorial: <http://ow.ly/HSZk30mD64c>. The tutorial can be accessed through mobile phones or computers and it will help nurses and midwives to evaluate and strengthen their digital professionalism in the use of the WhatsApp and other mobile and social media apps.

## Contact

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## **Description of Core Guidelines**

### **Protect privacy and confidentiality**

The protection of privacy is a fundamental right of clients (GNCZ, 2010; HPCZ, 2016) and needs to be ensured in the use of WhatsApp and other mobile and social media apps.

#### **Guidelines:**

1. Any client information, and in particular, information that might identify the client such as photographs  
... should never be documented, manipulated, shared, and discussed online,  
... via any digital or mobile application,  
... unless there is a specific therapeutic need,  
... or a clear benefit for research or teaching, which can't be met otherwise
2. Before nurses and midwives can document, manipulate, and share client information with the phone, tablet PC or any other computational device, they must obtain written informed consent from the client (see the consent sheet below).
3. In the case of minors and other clients who are not capable of consenting in an informed manner, written informed consent must be obtained from the authorised caretaker or guardian of the client (HPCZ, 2016).
4. In the informed consent process, the client needs to be informed about (1) the nature of information obtained (2) the purpose of the documentation (therapy, education, research, (3) how the material is documented and used, and (4) associated risks and benefits. Clients need to be also informed that (5) there is no absolute guarantee that the information will remain private, particularly if shared over the digital media and the phone. This information must be explained and included in the written consent sheet.
5. No pressure whatsoever may be exerted on the client or the guardian, because she or he is vulnerable and in a position of dependence vis-a-vis the health care provider.
6. In particular, the process of taking photographs of clients presents an invasion of privacy for many and can cause embarrassment and humiliation. It has to be carried out with utmost care and transparency. Obtaining informed written consent from the client (or the caretaker) is necessary before photographs can be taken.
7. The protection of clients' privacy by digitally masking or obscuring their faces on photographs should be avoided, as the person can still be identifiable.
8. If nurses or midwives come across digital content that harms a client's privacy, their rights or welfare, this should be brought to the attention of appropriate authorities, such as the ward/unit in-charge, nursing officer or any nursing staff to whom the nurse or midwife reports.
9. The disclosure of any information obtained at work is delicate and should be treated with utmost caution.

## Avoid distraction and client disregard

In clinical settings, the use of phones, and in particular of intrusive apps such as WhatsApp, leads to the distraction of nurses and midwives and results in an increased rate of errors. Moreover, it can cause feelings of disregard and neglect in clients. To avoid these problems, the following guidelines should be followed:

### Guidelines

1. Nurses and midwives must comply with all rules and regulations regarding the use of phones and social media applications established by health care institutions.
2. The use of personal phones on the ward, and particularly vis-à-vis clients, should generally be avoided.
3. If available, institutional phones should be used instead of personal phones.
4. Only if there is an urgent client care-related need which cannot be met otherwise, can the phone be used at the bedside.
5. In this case, hands must be washed in accordance with the infection prevention guidelines (MoH, 2012) before and after using the phone to avoid bacterial contamination.
6. If the phone is used vis-à-vis a client, the nurse/midwife should briefly explain the purpose of using the phone to the client and/or guardian.
7. Nurses and midwives should use the phone for private purposes only during authorised schedules outside of work, e.g. during a work break.
8. Managers, superiors, team leaders etc. are role models and need to demonstrate a particularly sensible use of the mobile phone and social media.

## Fight misinformation

Many messages that are circulated via phone apps such as WhatsApp are incomplete, misleading or false and the consequences of sharing these messages can cause damage to the nurse or midwife, the client, and the entire profession. Instead of sharing messages uncritically, nurses and midwives need to be at the forefront of fighting misinformation.

### Guidelines

1. Nurses and midwives should be aware that, according to recent research, much of the information that circulates on social media such as WhatsApp is false or incomplete. It is thus important to critically evaluate the trustworthiness of health/medical information and information that relate to other health professionals, particularly if they intend to forward or share the information.
2. Nurses and midwives should rely on credible information from institutions such as the World Health Organisation ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int)), International Council of Nurses (<https://www.icn.ch>) and International Confederation of Midwives (<https://www.internationalmidwives.org>) and the Zambian Ministry of Health

(<http://www.moh.gov.zm>) and crosscheck the information with the institutions' websites.

3. Nurses and midwives should scrutinise information obtained via social media, comparing it with established clinical/nursing standards and with credible research published in reputable journals.
4. Information which is posted without crediting the original source should be treated with even more caution.
5. Nurses and midwives should be at the forefront of fighting misinformation. They should correct wrong information and question doubtful information when they see it. The corrective action should be carried out in a firm but respectful and polite manner.

### **Separate personal and professional use**

A challenge of social media use is that personal and professional boundaries are blurring and this is particularly critical with regard to client communication.

#### **General recommendations**

1. Nurses and midwives are advised to maintain clear professional boundaries with clients on social media. In particular, becoming "friends" with current or former clients can complicate professional responsibilities and should be avoided.
2. In digital communication, nurses and midwives should make clear whether they act in their private capacity or on behalf of their organisation. In the second case, they need to be explicitly authorised to do so.
3. Nurses and midwives should always remain respectful, particularly when they disagree with something or someone on social media. In addition, they must never refer to clients in a disrespectful manner, even if the client is not identifiable.
4. Before posting a message, nurses and midwives may consider how comfortable they would feel if the message was made public.

## Use digital groups responsibly for professional purposes

Group spaces, such as WhatsApp or Facebook groups, have taken on a central role in professional communication and are being used for many professional and job-related purposes. Although digital groups can generate significant benefits for nursing and midwifery, inappropriate behaviour of some users gives rise to frustration and decreases the effectiveness of professional communication.

### Recommendations for professional group spaces:

1. When a digital space, such as a WhatsApp group, is used for professional purposes, participants are strongly advised to develop a number of ground rules at the beginning. Ground rules typically include the content, scope and communication behaviour of the group. The ground rules should be regularly re-posted by the administrator/moderator of the group.
2. Professional digital groups benefit from moderation. The role of moderators can be alternated to avoid overburdening individual persons.
3. If users post inadequate content or display inappropriate behaviour, moderators should re-post the respective ground rules, contact users individually, and, in the case of repeated breaches, consider banning them from the group.
4. The content of the messages should be aligned with the purpose of the group: non-professional content that is likely to annoy other participants in nursing / midwifery groups includes
  - chain letters: “share this with at least five of your friends”
  - gossiping and rumours
  - disrespectful comments about employers, colleagues, supervisors or other health care providers, nurses and midwives
  - religious and political messages
  - messages that are intimidating, obscene, sexually explicit, homophobic and racist, or offensive in other way
5. Group spaces should not be used for communication that concerns two participants only.
6. Nurses and midwives should ensure that their contributions fit with the ongoing line of discussion, for example by reading what has been said before.

## INFORMED CONSENT

### PERMISSION TO OBTAIN/ USE MY INFORMATION

1. What information will be obtained from me?
2. Why is this information being obtained? (describe therapeutic need, research or teaching purpose)
3. How will this information be documented and used?
4. What are the benefits?
5. What are the risks?
6. Name and role of the person obtaining information:

I confirm that I have read/ had the purpose of obtaining information from me explained to me and I understand the kind of information documented, its purpose and use, and associated benefits and risks. Although the information will be documented without identifiers such as my name, there is always the chance that someone may recognise me.

I also understand that my consent is voluntary and I am free to decline without giving a reason.

I \_\_\_\_\_ (names) agree to have my information used as specified above.

Check here if minor or unable to provide consent.

Signed/ Right thumb print: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ (Participant)

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ (Witness)

## References

- GNCZ (2010). **Professional Code of Conduct for Nurses and Midwives**, General Nursing Council of Zambia, Lusaka
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- MoH (2012). **Zambia Infection Prevention Guidelines**, Ministry of Health, Lusaka.