

## Participation in Public Forums

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### Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide registrants of the Alberta College of Occupational Therapists (ACOT) with practical guidance for responsible participation in public forums. Many Occupational Therapists (OTs) participate in public forums in both personal and professional capacities. Public forums can provide OTs with valuable opportunities to connect, lead, and grow within the profession. However, the highly accessible and often informal nature of public forums requires OTs to thoughtfully participate in them with the public interest and the profession's integrity in mind. When there is a clear connection between a registrant's conduct or actions in a public forum and the occupational therapy profession, ACOT expects registrants to comply with the [Health Professions Act](#) (HPA), ACOT's [Standards of Practice](#) (SoP) and [Code of Ethics](#) (CoE), and the [Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada](#) (see [Appendix A](#) for a list of sections most relevant to this guideline). When regulating a registrant's conduct or actions, ACOT balances the individual's right to freedom of expression with ACOT's mandate to protect the public.

## What is a Public Forum?

For the purposes of this guideline, the term *public forum* is used broadly to encompass any online, in-person, or other public space where people share information, including presenting, posting, publishing, exchanging, or discussing ideas and opinions publicly. Participating in a public forum may include participating in any form of social media, networking, public presentation, discussion panels or forums, podcasts, television or radio interviews, public gatherings, and distribution of print media.

## Participation: Professional or Personal?

People participate in public forums for professional reasons and for personally motivated reasons.

In their professional capacity, OTs might participate in public forums to develop a professional network; seek employment or career advancement; advertise and grow their services; promote the profession; present or be interviewed as a topic “expert”; etc. In fact, as part of their ethical responsibilities to the public and profession, registrants are encouraged to show leadership in the profession by engaging with professional networks or communities of practice (CoE E.5(c)), both of which would be considered public forums.

For personal reasons, an OT might use public forums to make or maintain relationships; share personal interests; seek entertainment, information and/or inspiration; promote or advocate an idea, belief or cause; or engage in self-expression.

No matter the reason for participating, ACOT registrants are encouraged to participate responsibly. Registrants are advised to keep in mind the privileged position of authority they hold as a regulated health professional and the resultant influence they have on members of the public. The public trusts and is readily influenced by health professionals like OTs. For this reason, it is necessary that registrants be thoughtful of the information they share in public forums and the impact it may have on others.

## Protecting the Public's Interest

ACOT is mandated to govern or regulate its members/registrants in a manner that protects and serves the public interest. ACOT's approach to regulation may be best described as "right-touch regulation"<sup>1</sup>. This means that ACOT becomes involved only when necessary, and regulatory action of any kind is taken only when a risk to the public is identified. Any action taken by ACOT aims to be comparable with the level of risk to the public. Applying this balanced approach to concerns and complaints about a registrant's participation in public forums serves to respect the registrant's rights and freedoms<sup>2</sup> (e.g., freedom of expression), while holding them accountable to their professional responsibilities as outlined in ACOT's *Standards of Practice* and *Code of Ethics*. One notable responsibility is to maintain a level of professional conduct that does not (a) exploit or cause harm to others; or (b) diminish the public's trust in the profession (CoE D.1).

For the most part, an OT's conduct, when participating in a public forum for personal reasons, is outside of ACOT's mandate of public protection. However, there are situations that would bring an OT's conduct or behaviour in a public forum within ACOT's mandate of public protection. These include:

- Egregious behaviour/conduct that goes against laws (e.g. *Criminal Code*; *Alberta Human Rights Act*) that exist to prevent serious harm, such as distribution of child pornography or exposing a person or a class of persons to hatred. Such behaviour seriously diminishes the character and reputation of the registrant and can risk the integrity of the profession.
- Behaviour/conduct that is directly linked to the profession and is contrary to ACOT's *Code of Ethics*, *Standards of Practice*, or *Bylaws*. This includes the registrant engaging in the conduct/behaviour in question while:
  - Using the protected OT title or identifying as an OT, or
  - Being readily identifiable as an OT by the audience/recipients of the information, or
  - Proclaiming the information shared is their professional OT opinion, or an opinion held by the OT profession.

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<sup>1</sup> Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care, Right-touch Regulation, accessed March 14, 2025 <https://www.professionalstandards.org.uk/improving-regulation/right-touch-regulation>

<sup>2</sup> The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/rfc-dlc/ccrf-ccd/>

An additional factor in the above situation that may influence ACOT's decision to intervene may be how large or broad the public audience is, inferring that the opportunity to do greater harm increases with a greater number of real or potential recipients of the information.

## Practical Guidance for Safe, Ethical Participation in Public Forums

The following advice is intended to assist ACOT registrants to participate safely and ethically in public forums:

- Clearly distinguish when you are expressing professional versus personal opinions.
  - Professional opinions should be evidence informed. Evidence sources or references should be available and verifiable.
- Represent your professional opinion accurately (CoE D.3). Whenever possible clarify if the information you share is:
  - Factual and objective or is an interpretation or analysis of facts.
  - Influenced by personal opinions or biases or contains errors or distortions.
- Check your content and tone before you share it in any public forum.
  - Ensure the content and tone of the information shared in any public forum, including, but not limited to, comments, ideas, opinions, images, and symbols are free from discrimination and hate and adhere to the Code of Conduct outlined in the [Alberta Human Rights Act, RSA 2000](#).
  - Ensure the information you are sharing in any public forum is respectful and adheres to your ethical responsibilities to your clients, colleagues, and the public; and maintains the integrity of the profession and the public's trust in the profession.
- When advertising your occupational therapy services to the public, ensure the information posted, printed, or shared is factual and verifiable and does not mislead or misinform the public (*Health Professions Act*, section 102). (See also SoP C.7, CoE D.3).

- Maintain appropriate boundaries (SoP G, H and L.10(f); CoE B.8). (Refer to [ACOT's Practice Guideline: Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries](#) for additional guidance.)
  - Be cautious when interacting with clients and their care partners through social media as this can progress to a boundary violation and/or conflict of interest. If interacting with clients and their care partners through an online forum, do so through a professional account rather than a personal account. When interacting with clients and their care partners in this manner, document your reasons for doing so, document how therapist-client boundaries will be maintained and document how any perceived or actual conflicts of interest are managed.
- Limit advice in public forums to universal strategies.
  - Do not offer individualised, specific advice in public forums. Instead, refer people to your office or to another provider who can provide occupational therapy services in accordance with ACOT *Standards of Practice*, especially Standards F. Informed Consent, I. Privacy and Confidentiality, and L. Service Provision.
- Protect your clients' privacy (SoP I, CoE B.1 & D.3).
  - Do not share specific information publicly that could identify a client. The combination of information about the person presenting/sharing information and the details about client characteristics or health service context can be enough for a client, their family members, acquaintances, or other health professionals to determine who the information is about.
  - Understand the privacy limitations of online public platforms. Manage the security settings of online accounts:
    - Security and privacy settings may change with application updates; review these settings regularly and adjust them accordingly.
    - Even the highest privacy and security settings may not protect from security breaches or others sharing screenshots containing identifiable information.
    - It is prudent to operate from the idea that there is nothing truly private or impermanent on the internet.

- Consider turning off the comment section on professional online accounts. If you choose to allow comments, be transparent about how your accounts will be monitored and moderated. For example, explain that you may remove any posts that contain confidential or identifiable information or misinformation.

## Summary

Participation in public forums can be both beneficial and challenging to navigate. Taking the time to distinguish between personal and professional participation, being mindful of the public's interest, and adhering to relevant legislation, *ACOT Standards of Practice*, *Code of Ethics*, and the *Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada*, will serve registrants well as they participate in public forums.

## Resources

Association of Canadian Occupational Therapists Regulatory Organizations (ACOTRO). Presentation at CAOT Conference 2013: [\*Social Media for Occupational Therapists: Balancing the Risks and Benefits\*](#)

Alberta College of Combined Laboratory and X-Ray Technologists. [\*Professionalism, Social Media, and Digital Citizenship E-module\*](#)

Alberta College of Pharmacy. [\*Social Media\*](#)

Alberta Human Rights Commission. [\*Protected Grounds\*](#)

College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario. [\*Use of Social Media\*](#).

College of Occupational Therapists of Ontario. [\*Advertising with Testimonials and Google Reviews\*](#)

College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta. [\*Advice to the Profession: Professionalism in Public Forums\*](#)

College of Physiotherapists of Alberta. [\*Good Practice: The Best and Worst of Using Social Media\*](#)

College of Physiotherapists of Alberta. [\*Social Media Guide\*](#)

Field Law (2023). [\*Navigating Freedom of Speech and Professional Regulation\*](#).

Field Law (2020). [\*Regulating the Use of Social Media by Professionals\*](#)

Government of Alberta. [\*Alberta Human Rights Act, RSA 2000\*](#)

Government of Alberta. [Health Professions Act, RSA 2000](#)

Government of Canada. [Criminal Code, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46](#)

Government of Canada. [The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#)

Ventola, CL (2014) *Social Media and Health Care Professionals: Benefits, Risks and Best Practices*. *Pharmacy and Therapeutics*; 39[7]: 491-499.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4103576/pdf/ptj3907491.pdf>

Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care. [Right-touch Regulation](#)

Professional Standards Authority for Health and Social Care. [Right-touch Regulation in Practice: International Perspectives](#)

## Appendix A: Relevant Sections and Clauses from the *Health Professions Act*, ACOT's *Standards of Practice*, *Code of Ethics* and *Competencies for Occupational Therapists in Canada*

### [Health Professions Act](#)

- *Part 2 Registration*
  - *29.1 Registrar Consideration of Applicant Character, Reputation*
- *Part 6 Other Matters*
  - *127.1 Reporting by Regulated Members and 127.2 Reporting of Regulated Members*
- *Part 7 Title Protection*
  - *Title Protection: Protected words, abbreviations*  
*128(1) No person or group of persons shall represent or imply that the person is a regulated member or that the group of persons consists of regulated members unless the person is a regulated member or the group of persons consists of regulated members.*
- *Part 8 Regulations, Bylaws, Codes of Ethics and Standards of Practice*
- *Schedule 15 Profession of Occupational Therapists*

## ACOT Standards of Practice

Standard	Applicable Section(s)
<b>C. Communication</b>	<p>To demonstrate respectful and transparent communication, a registrant:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>1. Incorporates equity-focused approaches into communication and professional interactions.</i></li><li><i>4. Identifies any barriers to communication and uses approaches and technologies suited to each person's needs and context.</i></li><li><i>6. Takes accountability for spoken, nonverbal and written communications (e.g., in meetings with clients and colleagues; in written reports, in documentation or other correspondence; on social media or in other public forums such as conferences).</i></li><li><i>7. Does not solicit or use endorsements or testimonials, including those from current or former clients or vendors regarding the registrant, their services or business, for advertising purposes.</i></li></ol>
<b>E. Documentation and Record Retention</b>	<p><i>A registrant</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>3. Documents within the client record details of the service provision process such as the</i>  <i>(f) relevant correspondence with the client or other key persons by telephone, videoconferencing, email, text or other messaging applications.</i></li></ol>
<b>G. Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries: Professional</b>	<p><i>A registrant</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>1. Understands the impact of power imbalances in favour of the registrant in the therapist-client relationship.</i></li><li><i>3. Identifies, discloses and manages situations of real, potential or perceived conflicts of interest.</i></li></ol>



Standard	Applicable Section(s)
	<p>4. <i>Manages conflicts of Interest that cannot be avoided, and documents steps taken to both avoid and manage any conflicts of interest.</i></p> <p>6. <i>Identifies situations that could potentially lead to a therapist-client boundary crossing and takes steps to ensure that the therapist-client relationship is not compromised.</i></p>
<b>I. Privacy and Confidentiality</b>	<p><i>A registrant</i></p> <p>5. <i>Ensures all applications used for communication with or about clients and/or for virtual service delivery are secure, and that client information stored and transmitted is safeguarded.</i></p> <p>6. <i>Avoids engaging in conversations about clients or the services provided, that can be overheard, read on public forums (e.g., social media) or that could otherwise compromise a client's privacy and confidentiality.</i></p>

### ACOT Code of Ethics

Code	Ethical Responsibility
<b>B. Responsibilities to Clients</b>	<p><i>Registrants have an ethical responsibility to provide services that incorporate equity-focused approaches and...</i></p> <p>1. <i>Provide occupational therapy services that uphold the dignity of each client.</i></p> <p>5. <i>Recognize the power imbalance inherent in the therapist-client relationship and determine and communicate boundaries appropriate for the practice situation.</i></p>

Code	Ethical Responsibility
	<p><i>6. Recognize that power imbalances can exist in the therapist-client relationship during services and after services have ended and can exist with a person with whom a client has a significant interdependent relationship. The registrant determines and communicates boundaries appropriate to the situation.</i></p> <p><i>8. Manage conflicts of interest that cannot be avoided.</i></p>
<p><b>D. Responsibilities to the Public and the Profession</b></p>	<p><i>Registrants have an ethical responsibility to:</i></p> <p><i>1. Maintain a level of professional conduct that does not</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>(a) exploit or cause harm to others; or</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>(b) diminish the public's trust in the profession.</i></p> <p><i>2. Recognize systems of inequity in their practice context and act within their professional sphere of influence to address and prevent racism and other forms of discrimination or oppression.</i></p> <p><i>3. Act transparently and with integrity in all professional and business activities (e.g., fees and billing, contracts or terms of agreement with clients or contracting organizations, advertising of professional services, use of social media or other online platforms, response to any real or perceived conflicts of interest, etc.).</i></p> <p><i>5. Show leadership throughout their career through one or more of the following: ...</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>(c) engaging with professional networks or communities of practice;</i></p>

**Domain B: Communication and Collaboration** (p.12)

*We listen, share, and work with others. Occupational therapy practice relates to people. Occupational therapists build respectful relationships with clients, team members, and others involved in the systems in which they work. The competent occupational therapist is expected to: ...*

*B2.3 Use electronic and digital technologies responsibly.*

**Domain E: Professional Responsibility** (p.16)

*We serve our clients, respecting rules and regulations. Occupational therapists are responsible for safe, ethical, and effective practice. They maintain high standards of professionalism and work in the best interests of clients and society. The competent occupational therapist is expected to: ...*

*E1.1 Respect the laws, codes of ethics, rules and regulations that govern occupational therapy.*

*E1.4 Protect client privacy and confidentiality.*

*E1.6 Take action to address real or potential conflicts of interest.*

*E1.9 Respect professional boundaries.*

*E2.3 Take preventative measures to reduce risks to self, clients, and the public.*

- According to the Accountability and Professional Responsibility SoP Clauses 4 and 5, registrants are expected to take reasonable steps to ensure their employer's or contracting organization's policies, procedures or processes (or their own, if self-employed) do not prevent them from meeting or exceeding the expectations outlined in this guideline.
- If your employer's or contracting organization's online or public presence policies, procedures or processes exceed what is outlined in this guideline, you should follow their guidance.

Contact ACOT if you have any questions: [info@acot.ca](mailto:info@acot.ca) or 780.436.8381