

Department of Medicine – Dalhousie University

Guidelines on Professionalism and Hand-Held IT Devices for Physicians and Students

With rapidly advancing technologies, hand-held devices have become an integral part of how we communicate and are being increasingly used to aid patient management. While very useful, it is important to acknowledge how these devices are used in the presence of others, e.g. patients, colleagues, teachers and other health care professionals. Outside the hospital it is common and often culturally acceptable to be simultaneously communicating in a small group and using a hand-held device. However, the dynamics in the hospital and learning environment are different and require attention to professionalism. In this light, these considerations are suggested as guidance.

Answering Pagers

- It is acknowledged that different pagers show varying amounts of information, e.g. inside/outside call, name, etc.
- It is usually accepted that a page requires a prompt response. When responding to a page, excuse yourself from the patient, teacher, etc., answer the page and return to your previous activity as soon as possible.

Cell Phones and Texting

- In general, medical communication is via paging but some clinicians now use cell phones instead of pagers. It is expected that phoning and texting in the hospital be limited to professional purposes. Cell phones should be put on silent mode during patient interactions, learning sessions, etc.
- Although it may be commonplace to text or answer a cell phone while talking informally outside of the hospital environment, it is considered unprofessional to do so for personal/social reasons during any patient encounter or small group session/meeting.
- When texting for professional purposes, avoid any patient identifying information in the text.

Tablets and “Smart Phones”

- These devices offer great potential in terms of learning and patient management, e.g. quickly looking up a drug dose or current clinical practice guidelines.
- Actively using these devices requires attention that is taken away from other attention requiring activities such as patient ward rounds and, in certain situations, can be considered unprofessional.
- In general, if the use of a device is required, announce to the patient and/or other members of the group that you are using it and why so that it is understood why your attention is being taken away from the immediate interaction.

In summary, hand-held IT devices are commonplace in the medical environment and are to be used only for professional reasons in the patient/learning environment unless there is a personal emergency. Announcing intended use is an important part of professionalism.