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## TikTok surgery reignites worries over doctors and social media

The case of a Thai doctor live streaming an operation on TikTok has highlighted growing unease about doctors on social media. **Shefali Malhotra** reports

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In October 2022, a Thai surgeon live streamed an operation on the social media app TikTok. The recording made its way to Twitter, causing an intense backlash. Some people complained that the doctor had violated his patient's privacy and should be severely disciplined. But others pointed out that it has become common practice to share details of treatments on social media with a patient's consent—why would live streaming be different?

“Follow-up will be carried out according to the medical professional ethics regulations,” said Ittaporn Kanacharoen, secretary general of the Medical Council of Thailand on Twitter.<sup>1</sup> The body is investigating and has declined to identify the surgeon, citing confidentiality.

Passakorn Wanchaijiraboon, assistant secretary general of the medical council, told *The BMJ* that the surgeon's employer, the Thai Ministry of Public Health, had conducted a formal inquiry and concluded that the video was accidentally live streamed. “The doctor deleted the video immediately and apologised to those involved,” he said, adding that the medical council had set up a new committee to consider such cases—“especially since we now have many more complaints similar to this one. I have to say that the Thai medical council does not support every kind of patient exposure to social media.”

Controversy over privacy and broadcasts of surgery is not new of course. As recently as 2021, a plastic surgeon in Ontario, Canada, committed an act of professional misconduct by allowing a television crew to film a patient's surgical procedure without her informed consent. The disciplinary committee said that he had also failed to ensure the privacy of another patient by inadvertently posting her images on social media on two occasions. He also posted photos taken before and after the patients' surgeries without consent.<sup>2</sup>

But the rise of easily accessible live streaming on platforms like TikTok—with an estimated 1.53 billion users in 150 countries around the world—presents a new social media headache for medical regulations and ethics.

### Myriad issues

Experts argue that live streaming or broadcasting surgeries is problematic for more reasons than just patient privacy. “In the operating room, the patient who is having the surgery performed on them should be the primary focus of the surgeon's attention,” says Peter Angelos, member of the ethics committee of the American College of Surgeons. “So, if one is essentially performing for an audience, whether it is

on social media or at a surgical meeting, there are clear concerns about the surgeon being distracted.”

Angelos says that the surgeon's professionalism is also a factor. “Patients are putting themselves in a very vulnerable position and don't have the ability to agree or disagree with the things that the surgeon is doing.”

Jason Roostaeian, associate clinical professor of plastic surgery at the University of California, Los Angeles, uses social media to promote his practice. “In plastic surgery, results are so critical,” he says. “Social media lets you showcase these results, as well as educate and allow patients to choose the right plastic surgeon.” But he draws the line at streaming a live surgery. “I don't want anything to break my concentration during a surgery. I don't think it is ideal to do that.”

Other doctors refrain from discussing their practice altogether. Siyamak Saleh, a doctor and social media influencer in South Africa with more than three million followers on TikTok, joined the platform in 2020 during the pandemic and found it an effective way to engage people with medicine. “I wasn't a social media person before the pandemic,” Saleh told *The BMJ*. “I realised I was answering 10-20 messages about covid-19 every day. So I thought of making videos that everyone can watch.”

Heidi Stensmyren, president elect of the World Medical Association, says that doctors have an obligation to share their knowledge. “Society has educated us and given us the power to heal. Being part of the public debate is paying back to society. So, it's not black or white, it's like a scale of grey.”

### What's the value—and to whom?

Amar Jesani, editor of the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, points out that “live streaming or taking videos of surgeries for educational and training purposes used to be very popular. It was discouraged because it was being done without proper consent of the patient.”

In a way, “surgeons were always performers” he says, but in today's context, we need to consider whose consent is being taken and the purpose of sharing video. “Is it for non-profit educational purposes, where it is going to be shown to doctors to learn from it, or is it to make commercial capital?”

As the medical community debates the ethical boundaries of taking videos, the influence of such posts is only growing. A 2021 study by Markus Rach, associate marketing professor at Shenzhen Technology University in China, concluded that seeing posts from plastic surgeons on TikTok

increased the likelihood that young adolescent women would undergo surgery to correct perceived bodily imperfections.<sup>3</sup> Posts by surgeons “positively moderated the impact on purchase intent, through surgeons’ status as medical professionals or experts. The latter provided user legitimization for surgical procedures,” Rach wrote. By contrast, posts by non-surgeons “negatively impacted the self-perception of TikTok users.”<sup>3</sup> “TikTok can be particularly problematic because of the way people consume content on it,” he says. “Unlike other platforms where users seek content, TikTok pushes content on its users.”

“I think one has to ask the value of any social media post,” says Angelos. “If there is value for the patient, we need to define what that value is. If there is no value for the patient and only the surgeon benefits, then I think we should not allow it.”

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