With the increasing use of social media throughout Asia, Dental Protection’s Louise Eggleton discusses learning points from the following case study to highlight the importance of maintaining professional boundaries.

A dentist receives a friend request from a patient on a social media site along with a private message inviting the dentist out on a date. The patient has only provided their name and no other identifying features such as a photograph. There are two patients of this same name at the dental surgery; however, the dentist is reasonably certain which of the two patients this may be as the staff were aware that one particular patient had recently enquired whether the dentist was married, or was currently dating at reception after the appointment. This further contact via social media has made the dentist feel uneasy, along with the knowledge this patient will be returning for their next appointment the following week.

This is obviously an uncomfortable and potentially awkward situation. If a patient is not clearly identified through the social media website, it is very difficult for the dentist to know how to respond, or to prove the identity of the patient. In this scenario, the dentist is reasonably confident that they know the identity of this individual so we will explore how best this situation may be managed.

Maintaining appropriate boundaries with patients is an essential part of each clinician’s professional responsibilities. A personal or overfriendly social media message from a patient can be managed in a number of different ways. It is the dentist’s prerogative to choose which they feel is the most appropriate, reflecting on the delicate situation to avoid any unintended embarrassment to both parties. In this scenario, the patient already has scheduled a further appointment with the dentist next week. As the identity of this individual is not entirely certain, to withdraw from providing treatment may then leave the dentist open to a complaint regarding discrimination. With this in mind, the dentist or the practice principal may wish to take the opportunity to explain to the patient that a member of the dental team has been personally contacted on social media and enquire if it was that patient.
Should the patient identify themselves, this will then provide an opportunity to inform the patient of a dentist’s obligation to work within professional boundaries and therefore explain why they are unable to respond to any social requests. It is hoped that the patient would be understanding and accept the explanation provided. However, if the patient denies any knowledge of the social media contact, then an apology for any misunderstanding can be provided.

If the dentist has received no further contact from this individual leading up to the appointment, it remains entirely the dentist’s personal decision if they choose to address this matter directly with the suspected patient or not. Should the dentist choose to ignore the social media message and continue the appointment in a professional capacity, it would be prudent to ensure that the dentist is not placed in a situation where they are alone with the patient or feel uncomfortable in any way. It would be sensible to ensure a chaperone, such as a dental nurse, is present at all times during any future appointments.

If the dentist receives confirmation of the patient’s identity in the meantime and feels their professional relationship has been compromised, they should discuss this with the practice principal and arrange a colleague to continue the patients care. Similarly, if the patient behaves in an unsuitable manner in the future, it will not be appropriate for this particular dentist to continue to provide the patient’s ongoing treatment and alternative arrangements will need to be made.

Maintaining professional boundaries with patients in a world in which social media is an easy and a swift way to communicate can be a tricky balancing act. The advice from Dental Protection is to ensure all use of social media and messaging from the Dental Practice to a patient are sent strictly from the practice messaging service only, avoiding use of personal telephone numbers, or email.

A clinician should not accept ‘friend requests’ from their patients on social media, even if the professional relationship appears non-threatening at the time. The Hong Kong Dental Council Code of Professional Discipline cites:

“A dental practitioner who abuses his professional position in order to pursue an improper relationship of a personal nature with a person with whom he stands in a professional relationship may be subject to disciplinary proceedings. He is therefore urged to take special care and prudence in circumstances which could leave him open to allegation of abuse of his position of responsibility and trust.”

If a dentist chooses to accept a ‘friend request’ or participates in social interactions with a patient on a personal level, and the relationship comes to an end, the potential fallout may provide the disgruntled patient with ammunition to cause damage to the dentist’s reputation. Therefore, formality — using a personal phone number or social media account to message a patient — can lend itself to unintended challenges of professionalism and it should be avoided.