

Managing Negative Online Reviews From Patients

Question

How should healthcare organizations and providers respond to negative online reviews from patients?

Answer

The internet and social media have fundamentally changed the ways in which healthcare consumers gather and exchange information. More and more, patients are going online to research health information, find providers, and comment about their positive and negative healthcare experiences.

Consumer trends show that 90 percent of patients use online reviews to evaluate healthcare providers, 71 percent use online reviews as the first step in finding a healthcare provider, and 80 percent trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations.¹

These statistics underscore the significance of social media and highlight the importance of preparing for potentially negative reviews. Although managing unfavorable reviews can present challenges and pitfalls, preparation is key.

First and foremost, the most prudent approach is to *avoid responding* to any online patient reviews, whether positive or negative. Even a general response to a review could violate HIPAA and state privacy laws.² Healthcare organizations should develop a clear policy for interacting with patients online that advises against responding to reviews, and providers and staff members should understand and acknowledge the organization's policy.

In lieu of replying to individual reviews, organizations should develop a standard disclaimer to post on review websites as well as their organizational website that (a) explains that the organization and providers are unable to respond to reviews because of their commitment to privacy laws, (b) directs

patients who have concerns, comments, questions, or feedback to contact the office directly to discuss the matter, and (c) emphasizes the organization's commitment to high-quality care.

Additional strategies that can help organizations, providers, and staff navigate negative online reviews and comments include the following:

- Designate an appropriate individual to monitor your organization's online presence, including online reviews and comments about providers. Prompt identification of a negative review or comment will allow the organization to proactively consider how to handle the situation, as the statement may indicate the patient is considering pursuing a claim.
- Consider using online alerts and other technology solutions to monitor feedback about your organization and to assist with reputation management for the organization and its providers.
- Ensure that anyone in your organization who is monitoring or looking at online patient reviews understands their legal obligations to protect patient privacy and confidentiality.
- View online reviews as a learning opportunity for both providers and staff members. Evaluate positive and negative reviews, and discuss how the organization can build on quality improvement (QI) processes.
- Reinforce the importance of treating all patients with dignity, courtesy, and respect. Establish the expectation that all providers and staff members exhibit professionalism during all patient encounters.
- Develop a well-designed [patient satisfaction survey](#) that measures patients' perceptions of quality of care, communication, logistics, and so on. Encouraging survey responses may offer patients an alternative option for voicing concerns and can provide valuable information and data.
- Devise a plan for how your organization can use social media to build a positive online presence and share its mission. Doing so can help build your online reputation and offset potentially negative feedback.
- Contact a review site's webmaster if you identify reviews that appear fake. Consider speaking with legal counsel if a patient posts information that you believe is defamatory.³

Resource

For more helpful information and tips, see MedPro's [Risk Resources: Social Media in Healthcare](#).

Endnotes

¹ Hedges, L., & Couey, C. (2020, April 3). *How patients use online reviews*. Software Advice. Retrieved from www.softwareadvice.com/resources/how-patients-use-online-reviews/#1; Viscomi, L. (2022, March 28). *Online reviews impact how patients select hospitals & doctors*. Healthgrades. Retrieved from <https://b2b.healthgrades.com/insights/blog/online-reviews-impact-how-patients-select-hospitals-doctors/>

² University of Rochester Medical Center. (n.d.). *Social media: a HIPAA danger zone*. Retrieved from www.urmc.rochester.edu/connect/social-media-toolkit/professional-use-guidelines/social-media-a-hipaa-danger-zone

³ Adler, E. L. (2016, September 21). How not to respond to bad patient reviews online. *Physicians Practice*. Retrieved from www.physicianspractice.com/view/how-not-respond-bad-patient-reviews-online; Chauhan, M. K. (2016, December 18). Managing patient online reviews can make a difference. *Physicians Practice*. Retrieved from www.physicianspractice.com/view/managing-patient-online-reviews-can-make-difference; University of Rochester Medical Center, *Social media: a HIPAA danger zone*; Kropf, S. (2015, May 8). Responding to negative online patient reviews: 7 tips. *Physicians Practice*. Retrieved from www.physicianspractice.com/view/responding-negative-online-patient-reviews-7-tips; Segel, R. (2017, January 4). Dissed by unhappy patients? Here's what to do. *MedPage Today*. Retrieved from www.medpagetoday.com/PracticeManagement/PracticeManagement/62349; Weber, S. (2015, December 14). How to: Deal with negative online reviews. *Physicians Practice*. Retrieved from www.physicianspractice.com/view/how-deal-negative-online-reviews; JD Supra. (2023, August 3). *Tips for healthcare organizations handling negative online reviews*. Retrieved from www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/tips-for-healthcare-organizations-3679119/; Cooper H. J. (2018). Pearls: How to address negative online patient reviews. *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research*, 476(6), 1162–1163. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.blo.0000533614.05050.10>

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