Managing Negative Online Reviews From Patients

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, 66 percent feel that it is very important or moderately important for providers to respond to online reviews, and 80 percent trust online reviews as much as personal recommendations.[1]

These statistics (a) underscore the significance of social media and review sites to the viability and reputation of healthcare organizations and practitioners, and (b) highlight the importance of preparing for potentially negative reviews.

Although managing unfavorable reviews can present challenges and pitfalls, various risk management strategies can help providers navigate these situations.[2]

1 As part of your organization's communication and social media policies, develop a strategy for interacting with patients online, including responding to both positive and negative online reviews. Make sure policies are compliant with HIPAA and relevant state privacy laws.

2 Make sure all providers and staff members are educated about your organization's social media policies and strategy, and stay up to date on guidance from professional associations about relevant legal and ethical obligations.

3 Designate an appropriate individual to monitor the organization's online presence, including online reviews and comments about individual providers.

4 Explore the possibility of 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.

5 Develop scripted language to respond to negative online reviews. The language should emphasize the organization's commitment to high-quality patient care and satisfaction as well as its relevant policies and procedures. The script also should encourage individuals who have concerns to contact the office directly.

6 Ensure that anyone responding to online patient reviews understands their obligation under HIPAA and state law to protect patient privacy and confidentiality.

7 In each circumstance, consider the best approach for handling the online review. Options include (a) not responding, (b) responding online in a professional manner, or (c) contacting a known patient directly to address their concerns.

8 When responding to negative reviews, avoid sounding defensive, making excuses, or criticizing the patient in any way. Under no circumstances should a provider or staff member engage in online arguments or behavior that might be considered threatening or unprofessional.

9 Reinforce the importance of treating all patients with dignity, courtesy, and respect. Establish the expectation that all providers and staff members exhibit professionalism during both in-person and online interactions.

10 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 processes.

11 Encourage trusted, satisfied patients to post online reviews. Reviews that discuss positive experiences with the organization and its providers will help counteract negative reviews.

12 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.

13 Consult legal counsel or consider contacting a review site's webmaster if a patient posts information that is false or defamatory.

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] 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; Cryts, A. (2016, December 1). Docs, ignore millennials' online reviews at your peril. *FierceHealthcare*. Retrieved from www.fiercehealthcare.com/practices/docs-ignore-millennials-online-reviews-at-your-peril; 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/