

Online reviews may be hazardous to your health

Editorial

Medicine is becoming consumer driven. Online reviews are increasing in popularity and social media have provided a platform for patients to express their opinions. More and more patients are screening their doctors online. A Vanguard survey based on 34,748 reviews across the nation demonstrated that 53% are related to communication, 35% are related to waiting time/waiting rooms, 12% are related to staff issues, 4% are related to healthcare delivery, and 2% are related to billing issues.¹ Vivian Lee wrote in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that “Patient reviews offer the opportunity to improve health care delivery while strengthening the provider/patient relationship.”² A study at the Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS), however, found reviews for doctors were inconsistent and that perhaps more attention should be paid to improving the validity of online ratings for assessing quality and the outcome of care provided.³ Consumer Medical conducted a study and found that just 2% of the physicians who had the top readmission rates, infection rates, and length of stay at the hospital, procedure volume, and positive patient outcomes were also top performers on the patient rating websites.⁴

Online review sites provide an outlet for expressing dissatisfaction and expressing negativity,⁵ and even extortion.⁶ It has been proposed that sensational and negative reviews often lead to heavier website traffic and make it less likely that the sites will remove more sensational reviews.⁷ In addition, competitors have been known to post negative reviews to manipulate and drive more volume to their own practices.⁸ Some health care providers are sharing patient medical details to defend criticism which in turn may divulge patient diagnosis, treatments, or procedures, which in turn violates the Health Insurance Portability and Accessibility Act (HIPAA). It is difficult or impossible for the physician to respond to many accusations, inaccuracies, or falsehoods by the patient. Physicians are not able to rate patients in return. Some physicians have tried to sue writers of false, inaccurate, or defamatory reviews, but the success rate is low and may lead to further problems.⁹ Also, any lawsuit may draw more unwanted publicity to the physician and the bad review. Doctors have expressed on-line that they are not running a pet-grooming business or restaurant. “Good doctors may not necessarily make you happy.”¹⁰ More needs to be done to educate the population that online reviews are not always reliable, consistent, or even accurate. They provide a good forum for the disgruntled to speak out, but do not always indicate clinical quality.¹¹

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