

Negative Feedback

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As physicians, we are constantly being evaluated from many directions, including our specialty boards, hospitals, peers, and especially our patients. With technological advancements, patient evaluation has taken on a whole new meaning. Now patients are free to rate and comment about their physicians on certain Web sites as one might rate a restaurant or hotel stay. I dared to look up my evaluations on one of these Web sites and found 2 negative posts. At first I was a bit disappointed, but after checking several reviews on some of my colleagues, I felt a little better.

It seems intuitive that most individuals who seek out a Web site to give feedback are dissatisfied or angry patients. However, you can find a lot of positive reviews on these sites. My theory, however, is that many of these posts have been generated by the physicians' offices themselves to dilute the negative comments.

A recent news article reported that many physicians are taking steps to limit this negative Internet chatter.¹ One physician interviewed in the piece owns a company that provides doctors with a standardized waiver agreement for a fee. The agreement states that patients will not post online comments about the physician, his/her expertise, and/or treatment. According to suggested wording in the

agreement, "Published comments on Web sites, blogs, and/or mass correspondence, however well intended, could severely damage [the] physician's practice." Using this system, physicians are notified when a negative rating appears online, and, if the author's name is known, physicians can use the signed agreements to get the sites to remove the posted entry.¹

According to the report, nearly 2000 physicians have signed up for this service.¹ In several instances, physicians have used signed waivers to get Web sites to remove negative comments. Of course, there is opposition to these waivers, with some feeling that they limit freedom of speech. Per the article, the American Medical Association (AMA) has taken no position on patient waivers, but AMA President Nancy H. Nielsen, MD, PhD, has previously said that these sites "have many shortcomings."¹

Obviously this is a very complicated issue and it will only become more prevalent as Internet usage increases. Anonymous negative feedback is never pleasant, but physicians and those who read the comments should consider the limitations of this information. Hopefully, in the future, medical bodies such as the AMA will formally address this issue and more balanced systems for feedback will be developed.

REFERENCE

1. The Associated Press. Docs seek gag orders to stop patients' reviews. MSNBC Web site. March 3, 2009. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29497619/>. Accessed April 4, 2009.

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