



# Your patients are talking: Isn't it time you take responsibility for your online reputation?

↴ Most physician reviews are positive, but negative criticism may be posted by a disgruntled patient. Here, why and how you should manage your online reputation.

**Ron Romano and Neil H. Baum, MD**

In a web-focused world, it should not take much convincing that monitoring your online reputation is time well spent. For some of us, it may be hard to believe that online reviews have evolved beyond restaurants and plumbers, but today your patients are flocking to the Internet to read and leave reviews about you, your staff, and your services. What can you do to protect your online reputation?

We first addressed this topic in December 2014 (“Using the Internet in your practice. Part 4: Reputation management—how to gather

kudos and combat negative online reviews”<sup>1</sup>). Have you implemented any of the tactics we offered then? We hope that you do take proactive steps to protect your online image.

## What is a physician's most precious asset?

You might answer this question with, “my patients” or “the training and education that I have obtained to practice my craft.” But the real answer is that your most precious asset is your reputation.

Physicians live and die by their reputations. We spend our entire medical careers polishing and protecting this status. The Internet dramatically has altered the way people gather information. It is sad but true that a single comment that only takes a few seconds and a single mouse-click to post can be seen by thousands and ruin that life-long effort.

## How are physicians rated on the web?

Online physician reviews are positive 70% to 90% of the time.<sup>2</sup> Most physicians have 5 or fewer reviews on any one site.<sup>3</sup> Of the approximately 30 sites that monitor physicians and hospitals online, one of the most popular is AngiesList.com. This site requires

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## How do you manage your online reputation?

Neil Baum, MD, and Ron Romano have offered tips on ways to manage online reputations in the past,<sup>1</sup> and they urge Ob-Gyns to take an active role in this process in order to increase positive exposure to patients and maintain an active practice. Is active reputation management something that Ob-Gyns are spending their valuable time on? To find out, OBG MANAGEMENT reached out to its Virtual Editorial Board. We found that many readers are paying attention to patient satisfaction. Some are soliciting online reviews and maintaining active upkeep on their online reputation. Here are a few responses we received from practicing ObGyns across the United States.

William E. McGrath Jr, MD, of Fernandina Beach, Florida, says that his office provides patients with a list of 5 popular review websites during their visits, and that approximately 1 in 10 will follow up with a review. Patient reviews are also prominently posted on his practice's website. The large, private, single-specialty group to which his practice belongs requires patient satisfaction surveys for quality assurance review and insurance contract negotiations. "It is all about physician-patient communication," he says.

Keith S. Merlin, MD, of Brockton, Massachusetts, says that he has checked online reviews to ensure their accuracy. His practice uses surveys, a suggestion box, and a mystery shopper to measure patient satisfaction, a worthwhile effort he says to understand where the practice is doing well and what needs to be done better.

Wesley Hambright, MD, of Jacksonville, North Carolina, reports that he has established a Google Alert to monitor for new content relating to his practice.

Patrick Pevoto, MD, MBA, of Austin, Texas, informs us that he has just started to think about ways to manage his

online reputation. He has created a website and is writing a monthly blog, which he posts on his site. He acknowledges the importance of assessing patient satisfaction in his practice but is not applying large-scale measurement techniques yet. To keep his patients happy, he handles concerns that arise on a personal, case-by-case basis.

John Armstrong, MD, MS, of Napa, California, also reports that management of his online reputation is in the beginning stages. He uses focus groups and feels that listening to his patients when they do comment on their experience is important to his overall practice. Listening helps to "identify areas to improve and reaffirms when we are doing well," he says. To keep his patients happy, he strives to "give extraordinary care and simply be nice to people." When issues arise, making it right and being polite are important elements, he asserts.

Delos J. Clow, DO, MS, of Chillicothe, Missouri, does measure patient satisfaction, and feels this is very important to his practice in order to identify and correct any negative trends. He does not actively monitor his practice reputation online.

Robert del Rosario, MD, of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania, similarly does not actively manage an online reputation, but does focus on patient satisfaction. To enhance satisfaction, he tries to de-emphasize the electronic medical record to "make visits more personal and less interrogative." Additionally, his practice objectively gauges aspects of care that might be able to be improved upon.

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registration and a fee; a member can review a physician every 6 months. On free websites such as Yelp.com and doctorsscorecard.com the reviewer can comment once. Other sites such as vitals.com or DrScore.com limit the reviews from 1 source, which prevents an angry patient from stuffing the ballot box.<sup>2</sup>

### Pay attention

At a minimum, physicians should be monitoring their reputation by conducting periodic searches—"Googling" their name and practice name—to identify what information is already online. You may find that 3, 4, or even 10 reviews appear on various sites. If you are lucky, these reviews will be positive. Don't be surprised, however, if 1 or 2 are not. Let's face

it: even the most accredited and experienced physician cannot possibly satisfy every patient who walks through the door.

### Tell your own story

As physicians, you may not have control over what others say about you, but you can take ownership of your online presence by establishing a website, blog, and social media platforms, ensuring your story is being properly communicated. Without an online presence, you are entirely at the mercy of directory and review sites.

### Optimize your website

A site that successfully uses search engine optimization (SEO) will have the upper hand

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## Should you respond to a negative online review?

### **CASE** Patient criticizes physician in a review forum

A physician with a robust Internet presence will have his or her name and the practice appear at the top of search engine results pages (as is the case with Dr. Neil Baum when “urologist” plus “New Orleans” is typed into the Google search engine window). By far most of Dr. Baum’s reviews are positive. In one instance, however, a patient on a physician review website referred to Dr. Baum as “technologically advanced but more motivated to increase his income by performing too many diagnostic tests.”

If you find a negative comment in an online directory or review website, what should you do?

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) within the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for handling Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA)<sup>1</sup> complaints. Deven McGraw, OCR’s deputy director of health information privacy, states that “just because patients have rated their health provider publicly doesn’t give their health provider permission to rate them in return.”<sup>2,3</sup> In fact, some health care providers who responded to poor online reviews ran into trouble with privacy rules established by HIPAA.<sup>2,3</sup>

Mr. McGraw notes that, when responding to online reviews, health professionals should speak generally about the way they treat patients while complying with HIPAA regulations. He suggests, “If the complaint is about poor patient care ... say, ‘I provide all of my patients with good patient care’ and ‘I’ve been reviewed in other contexts and have good reviews.’”<sup>2,3</sup>

According to Yelp’s senior director of litigation, Aaron Schur, most patient complaints center on practice-based concerns such as wait times, office staff, and billing, not about the medical service delivered. Although most physicians do not respond, says Mr. Schur, those who do, tend to ask patients to discuss the matter in private or to apologize.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **What are the consequences of a HIPAA violation?**

OCR Director Jocelyn Samuels says that the office’s primary role is to help health providers follow HIPAA regulations.<sup>2,5</sup> The OCR can resolve HIPAA violations privately and informally, impose fines of up to \$50,000 per violation, or it can file criminal charges against violators.<sup>2,4</sup>

The majority of the office’s investigation and enforcement of HIPAA has been against large medical data breaches.<sup>2,5</sup> Small privacy breaches by large health care providers (eg, CVS, Walmart, Lab Corp, Quest Diagnostics, and others) generally do not result in legal consequences; the providers are privately warned. According to *ProPublica*, even repeated HIPAA violations tend not to be fined.<sup>2,4</sup>

Small-scale infractions can be more damaging on a personal level to both patients and physicians. However, the OCR does not typically become involved in privacy breaches that include only a few individuals. Health care providers are rarely punished for small HIPAA breaches; instead, the OCR typically

settles for pledges to fix any problems and issues reminders of HIPAA requirements.<sup>2,5</sup>

Although the OCR is often the only place patients can go to seek vindication, HIPAA does not support the right to sue for violation of personal privacy. People who seek a legal remedy must find another means, which is easier in some states than in others.<sup>2,5</sup>

Health care providers have tried myriad ways to attempt to combat negative reviews. Some have sued patients, attracting a flood of attention but achieving little legal success. Others have asked patients to remove their complaints.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **Best practices**

**Create and circulate a policy.** Medical privacy breaches involving sensitive health details can occur when office or hospital staff share patient information due to personal hostility or lack of understanding of HIPAA policy.<sup>2,5</sup> Have a practice policy for responding to online reviews by patients, and make sure the staff members who have access to the practice’s online accounts understand your policy and the possible repercussions of not following it. Teach and continue to remind your staff about HIPAA regulations and hold them to a high ethical level of privacy.

**Solicit reviews on an ongoing basis.** Jeffrey Segal, a review site critic, says that all reviews are valuable. Physicians should respond carefully to negative comments and encourage satisfied patients to post positive reviews. “For doctors who get bent out of shape to get rid of negative reviews, it’s a denominator problem,” he said. “If they only have three reviews and two are negative, the denominator is the problem. ... If you can figure out a way to cultivate reviews from hundreds of patients rather than a few patients, the problem is solved.”<sup>2,3</sup>

### **CASE** Resolved

Dr. Baum never responded directly to the negative patient review, and others he has received. He balances the rare negative response with numerous and plentiful positive responses by making it a practice to encourage reviews from all of his patients.

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when patients hunt for a physician in your area because the information will be posted at the top of the search page, well above the reviews and listings left by patients and other third-party sources. This is a critical step for your online brand because it will be difficult for other sites to mask your credibility. This should motivate you to develop an online presence, regularly update information, and participate in Internet dialog with other sites.

### **Generate quality, natural reviews**

If your site is in good standing in search results, the next step is to implement a patient reviews strategy to start acquiring positive online reviews. A third-party provider can work with you to launch a local search engine optimization strategy and a natural reviews management program tailored for your practice's needs. For the most part, however, we do not recommend using an online reputation management company. It is far better and more economical to ask satisfied patients to provide reviews.

At first, you may be tempted to actively petition or solicit reviews through survey software, but this method is manipulative

and can lead to reputation problems for your practice. Google actively tracks where reviews originate and uses advanced algorithms to determine the review's integrity. A petitioned review is classified as less valid, and therefore Google will assume it was not written under the same pretense as a natural, unsolicited review.

Quality customer service and outstanding patient care are often what achieve the organic reviews you are striving for. To encourage a steady flow, administer a process that encourages your most satisfied, loyal patients to review your practice.

**Keep the process simple.** Capture positive compliments at the point of service. Before a patient leaves your office, hand her a card (**FIGURE**, page 38) with easy steps for posting an online review, or offer her a tablet that links directly to your website review section. If your patient is not computer savvy, ask her to complete a 4- to 5-question survey and give her a clipboard and a pen. Then have a staff member post it on your website.

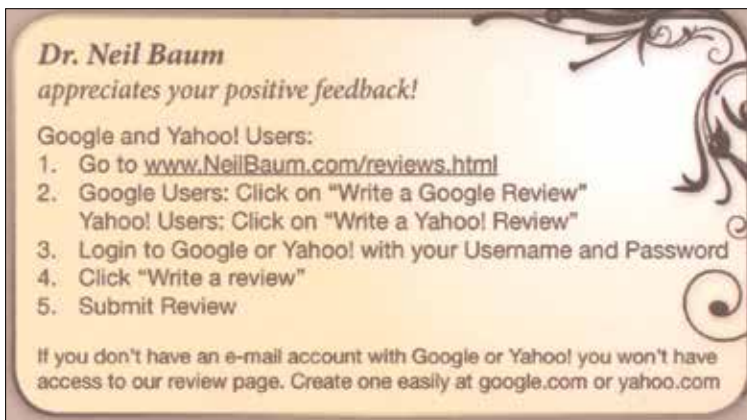
In Dr. Baum's practice, there is a poster in every exam room and in the reception area where patients can scan the quick response

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## FIGURE Feedback card



Before a patient leaves your office, hand her a card that offers easy steps for posting an online review.

(QR) code and immediately submit a testimonial. Using this system, the practice is able to collect 3 to 5 positive reviews every day.

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A patient pleased with your staff's service will happily take 5 minutes to submit a review. Acquire 5 to 10 reviews monthly and within a year's time you will have generated enough positive reviews to negate any damaging comments that inevitably will emerge from time to time.

### The bottom line

Patients are seeking and leaving reviews about you and your practice online and you need to actively manage your online reputation. Do not let one disgruntled patient ruin your reputation. Our advice: Do not wait for a negative review to begin your reputation management. Take an active role and generate positive reviews to drown out negative remarks made by an occasional patient. This is an inexpensive process that does work. 📌

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