



How to manage negative online reviews

Devising a robust practice complaints policy can go a long way towards preventing negative online reviews by patients, writes Niamh Gallagher

IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT, service users place an enormous amount of value on the opinions of their peers. There is a trend towards patients considering healthcare services akin to any other form of consumer service, which can result in patients leaving online reviews. As with any reviews, they can be positive or negative. Positive reviews speak for themselves and are generally always welcomed. However, GPs and practice staff occasionally may find themselves subject to negative online reviews, on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as via some online search engines such as Google.

Regrettably, patients are often more likely to leave negative rather than positive reviews online, which can be upsetting for the doctors and staff members involved and can overshadow the positive experiences of thousands of patients who pass through the doors of a practice.

Why do patients leave negative reviews?

There is no catch-all answer but generally a review can be an impulsive reaction to a difference of opinion or a difficult situation. Common examples of what might prompt a negative review include:

- A patient disagreeing with a diagnosis/treatment plan
- A doctor refusing a request for medication on the basis that it is not clinically indicated
- Manner and attitude issues, perceived or otherwise

- Waiting times for appointments
- Practice policies such as face mask-wearing.

Nobody wants to read a negative review about themselves and particularly where complaints are exaggerated, unfair or simply untrue. If a post is made anonymously, it may be impossible to verify who made the post or if it was even made by a patient. Every case is different and we have set out below some factors to consider when deciding how best to deal with negative online reviews.

Patient confidentiality

It is normal for doctors to feel powerless against unfair or vexatious reviews as unlike other service providers, they are bound by their ethical obligations of confidentiality and cannot defend themselves on public forums as they would risk violating doctor-patient confidentiality.

Doctors also have a duty to maintain professional standards in all communications with patients, including online communications. The Medical Council's *Guide to Professional Conduct and Ethics* states: "patients are entitled to expect that information about them will be held in confidence. You should not disclose confidential information to others except in certain limited circumstances."

Responding to a negative online review is not one of those limited circumstances. Therefore, when faced with a negative post, it is impossible to give the doctor's side of events

without revealing personal information about the patient. Merely acknowledging the fact that the reviewer is a patient constitutes a breach of confidentiality.

How should you react?

However tempting it may be, it is strongly advisable not to post a personalised response to a negative online review. Each situation is different and should be assessed on a case-by-case basis and if necessary, with assistance from your indemnifier.

The following risk management tips may help practices navigate these situations:

- Designate an appropriate member of the team to monitor online reviews or comments
- Develop scripted generic language to respond to negative online reviews in a general way, along the lines of: “The practice is committed to providing high-quality patient care to all patients and we regret that the poster was unhappy with the care provided. We invite the poster to contact the practice directly and make a complaint. In accordance with our practice complaints policy, all complaints are taken seriously and are investigated thoroughly”
- Take time to read the review and identify the key areas of concern raised by the patient. There may be some positives about the service provided in the negative review
- Treat the review as you would any complaint. Don’t delay looking into it, as the longer a time has elapsed before you respond, the more people are likely to have seen the negative review
- In each circumstance, consider the best approach for handling the online review. Options might include:
 - Not responding at all
 - Responding with generic wording or contacting the patient directly by telephone or in writing to address their concern (if they are identifiable).

When speaking to patients about negative reviews, avoid sounding defensive, making excuses or criticising the patient in any way. It is best practice not to become defensive, as this type of response may escalate the situation because it appears to undermine and call into question the validity of the patient’s experience. In some such circumstance, the patient may be prompted to add unfavourable content to the original online review.

When a patient takes the time to write a negative review, they generally feel wronged and are looking for some kind of recompense. Try to understand why they feel that way, and how their experience led them to that reaction. The patient should be invited to make a complaint in accordance with the practice complaints policy so that a proper investigation can take place.

The patient should be asked to consider removing the online review while the investigation is taking place or at least amending it to reflect the effort to address the concerns. Details of discussions with the patient should be recorded in the patient’s records. This will be crucial in the event of a complaint to the Medical Council.

View online reviews as a learning opportunity for the practice. Evaluate positive and negative reviews and discuss how the practice can build on its quality improvement processes.

As with any complaint, make sure that details of the investigation, actions and response are documented and saved

Tips for dealing with negative online reviews

- Use generic scripted language to respond to the review
- Designate a member of the practice team to monitor online reviews
- Treat a negative online review as you would any complaint
- Develop a robust practice complaints policy
- When dealing with complaints, avoid sounding defensive
- Ask the patient to consider removing the review while an investigation takes place
- Deal with issues as they arise

in a complaints folder, separate from the patient’s medical records. It may also be advantageous to include a screenshot of the actual review and source, eg. Facebook or Twitter.

In some cases, unfortunately, a ‘review’ can constitute hateful, violent or inappropriate content which is in violation of the host website or platform’s guidelines. Such content can be reported and ‘take-down’ requests made by following the specific instructions provided by individual host websites/platforms. If a review is defamatory of an individual or the practice, legal advice can be sought on how to proceed.

How to avoid bad reviews

Unfortunately, there is no magic wand, but taking the time to devise a robust complaints policy that patients are aware of can help prevent them from resorting to online forums. If a patient expresses dissatisfaction, they should be directed to the policy. While it may seem counterintuitive to invite complaints, making patients aware of the policy is key to its effectiveness and it should be proactively communicated by way of posters/practice website etc.


A complaints policy facilitates an open and consistent approach to communicating with patients, allowing for an apology or statement of regret when appropriate. A policy often has the effect of resolving complaints swiftly and efficiently to everyone’s satisfaction, without patients having to resort to the internet.

If you feel at the time of a consultation that a patient seems unhappy or that they have an issue, it is best to bring it up at the time in a sensitive and empathetic manner. Open communication at the time at which the problem occurs may entirely de-escalate the situation. It is difficult in certain scenarios to acknowledge a patient’s unhappiness, but ultimately it can help both parties in the long run.

Summary

In general, due to a doctor’s ethical obligations of confidentiality and professionalism, we recommend avoiding responding publicly to negative online reviews. In our experience, the best way to avoid negative online reviews is to deal with an issue as it arises and having a clear and robust policy, of which all practice staff and patients are aware.

At Medisec, we recognise how stressful, disappointing and sometimes hurtful online reviews can be for doctors, and we are always happy to assist our members in navigating the process and discussing risk practices that can help reduce negative feedback.

For a copy of our template complaints policy and suite of posters for your practice, please contact the team at Medisec and visit www.medisec.ie for risk resources and information on complaints management. 

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