

Risk tips to manage negative online reviews

In an increasingly digital environment, consumers place an enormous amount of value on the opinions of their peers. Positive reviews speak for themselves. A glowing testimonial or rating from a customer can add great value to a business and boost staff morale.

Conversely, a negative review can adversely affect the reputation of a business and the well-being and morale of its staff.

In healthcare, prospective patients frequently access websites and social media to help them decide which doctor to see.

Unfortunately, doctors and their staff occasionally may find themselves subject to negative online reviews on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as via some online search engines such as Google.

For doctors and their staff, who strive hard to provide an excellent patient service, receiving a negative review online can be very upsetting as well as causing significant ramifications to a clinician and practice's reputation and potential damage to the doctor-patient relationship. In addition, doctors often feel powerless against unfair or vexatious reviews as they are bound by ethical obligations and in the main cannot defend themselves on such public forums due to the risk of breaching patient confidentiality. Doctors have a duty to maintain professional standards in all communications with patients, including those posted online.

However, negative reviews can present an opportunity to demonstrate dedication to patients and provide an impetus to reflect and improve practice when dealt with carefully and in a measured way.

Although unfavourable reviews can present challenges and pitfalls, it is important to handle the reviews professionally. The following risk management tips may help navigate these situations.

1. Designate an appropriate member of staff to monitor the practice's online presence and online reviews / comments.
2. In each circumstance, consider the best approach for handling the online review. Options might include (a) not responding at all, (b) responding online in a professional manner, or (c) contacting a known patient directly by telephone or in writing to address their concern (if they are identifiable). It is important that while the task can be delegated, a partner in the practice should have full oversight on any response or voice from the practice.
3. Consider that in some circumstances, taking no action may be the best option. This approach avoids the possibility of inflaming a situation and risking a series of more negative posts. In some cases where the patient is not identifiable, it may be the only option.
4. Develop scripted language to respond to negative online reviews. The language should emphasise the practice's commitment to high-quality patient care. The focus of the response should be aimed at deescalating the situation, increasing patient satisfaction and should encourage individuals who have concerns to contact the doctor/practice directly. It should always state that the practice takes its ethical obligations very seriously and no patient details will be discussed on a public platform.
5. Take time to read the review and identify the key areas of concern raised by the patient. There may also be some positives about the service provided in amongst the negative review.
6. Treat the online review as you would any complaint. If addressing the review, do not delay, as the longer time has elapsed before you respond, the more people have seen the negative review.
7. When responding to negative reviews, avoid sounding defensive, making excuses, or criticising patients in any way. The response must be generic and no patient identifiable information can be included. It is best practice not to engage in online arguments or become defensive, as this type of response may escalate the situation because it seems to undermine and call into question the

validity of the patient's experience. 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.

8. One of the best ways you can show your appreciation to your reviewers is by thanking them. This is important as it shows that you acknowledge their feedback even if it is negative. This also demonstrates that you take every type of feedback seriously and that you want to improve your services and the patient experience.
9. Aim to keep the response as short as possible. For example:

Thank you for your feedback. We are sorry to hear that you had a poor experience at our practice. Our goal is to provide excellent patient care at every step of your journey. We are unable to discuss personal patient information on a public platform but please do contact the practice directly if you wish to discuss your concerns. Best wishes Dr xxx

10. 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.
11. As with any complaint, make sure that details of the investigation, actions and response are documented and saved in the practice's complaint folder, separate from the patient's medical records. It may also be advantageous to include a screen shot of the actual review and source, e.g. Facebook, Twitter etc.
12. Devise a plan for how your practice 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. For example, you may wish to encourage trusted, satisfied patients to post online reviews. Reviews that discuss positive experiences with the practice and GPs will help counteract negative reviews.

For further information, please refer to Medisec's article: *How to manage a negative online review*
<https://medisec.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/How-to-handle-negative-online-reviews.pdf>

"The contents of this publication are indicative of current developments and contain guidance on general medico legal queries. It does not constitute and should not be relied upon as definitive legal, clinical or other advice and if you have any specific queries, please contact Medisec for advice".