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From this week's Focus

Review sites force doctors into the tricky business of reputation management

By: Monica Ginsburg November 21, 2011

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"Anybody can put anything on the Internet," says one physician. "If someone doesn't like you, they can be very disruptive at no cost to themselves at all."

Photo by: Stephen J. Serio

normal part of other industries, so it makes sense that more are popping up in health care."

So far, consumers have been slow to latch on to online doctor reviews: Of the 74% of adults who use the Internet, only 16% have consulted online rankings of doctors or other health care providers and just 4% have posted reviews online of a doctor, according to a May 2011 report from the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C.

Still, most industry observers believe online ratings are here to stay and adjusting to this new, consumer-oriented reality will challenge doctors and hospitals. Can a Yelp-like review site really help consumers sort out good doctors from bad when there are so many variables involved? And can a review written by a lay person provide a complete or accurate picture of a provider's professional abilities?

Doctors and hospital executives are quick to say no. But the Internet, which provides every patient with a public soapbox, is forcing health care providers to deal with the tricky business of reputation management.

"Anybody can put anything on the Internet," says Allen Puttermann, a Chicago-based specialist in cosmetic eyelid and facial surgery. "If someone doesn't like you, they can be very disruptive at no cost to themselves at all."

Like many physicians, Dr. Puttermann, 73, says he doesn't pay attention to reviews. But eight months ago, a new patient told him a negative review about his practice had been posted online. "The patient was scheduled for surgery and was concerned about what he had read," Dr.

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Putterman says. "I referred him to some of my other patients who I thought would provide a more informed perspective."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that online doctor reviews appeal to younger, Internet-savvy patients—one reason industry-watchers expect review sites to grow in popularity.

Carolyn Breit, 27, who moved from Palatine to Roscoe Village in May, has since used Yelp and ZocDoc to find an ear, nose and throat specialist, a dentist and a gynecologist. "I was new to the area, I had new insurance and I didn't know where to go," says Ms. Breit, who works for Sprout Social, a Chicago social-media company. "I was looking for a doctor that got reviewed more and was rated highly."

She's already posted her own comments following two appointments. "My overall experience with the ENT was good, but I would have liked more information on what my insurance covered, and I mentioned that in my review," she says. "I work in social media, so I like the idea of using these sites to research doctors."

Orthopedic surgeon Harun Durudogan, 48, doesn't believe online review sites do much to drive traffic to or away from his Oak Lawn practice. Most of his patients come via referrals from doctors, nurses and other patients.

When patients have questions about his practice and others in the area, he refers them to the Advocate Health Care website, which covers 10 suburban hospitals and highlights data on the Oak Brook-based system's 3,900 physician partners, of which Dr. Durudogan is one. (Physician partners are selected, in part, based on their experience and patient outcomes, as well as feedback from other physicians.) The Advocate site offers data on providers' experience and outcomes, as well as feedback from other physicians.

"Consumers might be best served by sites like this that I think do a better job of assessing a doctor's abilities," Dr. Durudogan says.



"Anybody can put anything on the Internet," says Allen Putterman, a specialist in cosmetic eyelid and facial surgery. "If someone doesn't like you, they can be very disruptive at no cost to themselves at all." Photo: Stephen J. Serio

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Surgeon Harun Durudogan says online reviews have little effect on his practice. Photo: Erik Unger

88% POSITIVE

Despite concern that Yelp and its kin are likely to be a reputational minefield for doctors, an analysis of physician-rating websites published last year in the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* found that 88% of online reviews are positive—a reading that's roughly in line with user-

review trends across all industries, according to research by Austin, Texas-based social commerce company Bazaarvoice Inc. The study also found that many of the negative comments were about things like a lack of parking or waiting too long in the waiting room, issues common to any business that can be addressed without violating patient confidentiality.

"There are lots of parts to the patient interaction that we're not always privy to: what happens when a patient calls in, how they're greeted by our staff, how billing is handled," says Jonathan Buka, 55, an ophthalmologist at the Eye Specialists Center in Chicago Ridge and three other locations.

"We try to meet our patients' expectations. If we're not, we want to pick up on those things as early as possible," he says. "Any type of feedback is helpful."

Dr. Buka's staff does a monthly check of online reviews, which, he says, do bring patients to his practice. He's made changes based on online feedback, including expanding handicapped seating and improving staff-patient communication.

"The danger is that you can't make everyone happy," he says. "Occasionally we all have personal interactions that are less than perfect. If you listen (to the reviews) and don't get defensive about it, you will learn something about your patients and your practice."

"If you choose not to listen, you'll likely repeat the same patterns," he says, adding, "Look for things you can change."

NEW TOOLS NEEDED

Robert Wachter, a professor in the department of medicine at the University of California at San Francisco, says that "to scientifically measure the quality of medical care is a very tricky thing to do, but what we're seeing with review sites is an important start."

What's missing, he says, are tools to help consumers quickly and easily assess a variety of information, such as a doctor's training, number of procedures done, board certification and outcomes, which help in making informed health care decisions.

But we are seeing some first steps, says Dr. Wachter, a nationally recognized expert on patient safety and health policy.

Healthgrades.com, for example, blends patient survey scores with information on malpractice, sanctions and medical board action, along with ratings of affiliated hospitals.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services profiles the hospitals in its Medicare network ([HospitalCompare.hhs.gov](#)) and includes not only surveys of patients' hospital experiences, but also measures of serious complications, outcomes and deaths, and the use of medical imaging.

Illinois last month launched an online database on [IDFPR.com](#) with information on education, training, criminal convictions and disciplinary action on the state's 46,000 licensed physicians and surgeons. And a federal mandate under the current health-insurance reform initiative would create a forum to compare physicians, conduct formal patient surveys and report clinical outcomes.

"There are lots of early signs that tell you that the end game will not simply be patient-generated ratings," Dr. Wachter says. "There's no question within three to five years we'll see some good robust sites that blend ratings with other information."

"In general, this is a healthy trend," he says. "Feedback is a gift."

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