

Risk Management Insights

Managing Negative Online Reviews

A patient posted a negative review about your practice on a review website. What should you do? The first recommendation is to pause and consider your options. You may feel that a response will protect your practice's reputation. However, the patient could allege a HIPAA violation if the response acknowledges a doctor-patient relationship or confirms treatment details. Therefore, it is recommended that you consider the benefits and potential risks of responding.



Negative Review Response Options

No response. A response to every review is not expected. Generally, patients may appreciate the authenticity of a practice's online review ratings when a negative review is included.

Contact the patient privately. If you decide to respond and can identify the patient from the review, consider contacting the patient directly using their preferred mode of communication from their file. The goal of this conversation would be to obtain more information to understand the patient's concerns. With a calm and genuinely interested tone, you may be able to address any confusion or correct the situation that motivated the negative review in the first place.

Use a standard response to mitigate HIPAA violations. Although the patient may post their protected health information online, this does not imply consent that a doctor can confirm or disclose patient information. A general response, such as the sample below, can help demonstrate an openness by the practice to receiving patient feedback without acknowledgment of a patient-doctor relationship or sharing of any personal information regarding the reviewer. Additionally, by providing contact information for the practice, this general response encourages that any additional contact with the reviewer is taken offline.

Here's an example of a standard response:

"We appreciate your feedback. Our practice strives to provide excellent customer service and quality patient care experience, and we work hard to constantly improve our practice. In order to protect the privacy of patients or potential patients, we do not address specific patient comments made online. Please contact our office directly so we may address your concerns privately."

Respond only once. If you do respond and the patient tries to engage in further discussion online, it is recommended that you stop the conversation. Continuing the conversation may escalate the situation.



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General Practice Recommendations

- Implement a policy on how to respond to certain reviews.
- Identify one staff member to monitor online activity concerning your practice on review sites. If the review is dishonest or violates the website's terms and conditions, it may be possible to get the website to remove the review; however, review sites' policies vary.
- Encourage patients to leave positive reviews. These positive reviews will help counteract negative reviews.
- Set realistic expectations for your practice's online presence. Avoid using words like "expert," "painless," "guaranteed," etc. since this could set unreasonable expectations and may lead to defense challenges if the patient felt an outcome was guaranteed.
- If a patient alleges treatment issues in a negative online review, consider opening an incident with the Claims Department. Remember, an incident is any event that may lead to a claim. Reporting an incident has no effect on your premium and allows us to guide and support you through the situation.

Ultimately, how you respond is your decision. It is important to remember that anything posted online is in the public domain and may be subject to discovery in litigation.

External Social Media and Online Review Resources

"Social Media Best Practices" from AAOMS

https://aaoms.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/AAOMS_SocialMedia_Best_Practices.pdf

"AAOMS Social Media Guide for Doctor Review Sites" from AAOMS

https://aaoms.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/AAOMS_SocialMedia_Guide_Dr_Review_Sites.pdf

Fortress Insurance Company is a professional liability insurance company owned and operated by dentists. Fortress only insures dentists and knows firsthand how to protect you and your practice. Walsh Duffield is the exclusive Fortress agents for dentists in the Seventh District Dental Society. Contact Christine Garvelli at 716-362-7363 or cgarvelli@walshduffield.com with any insurance questions.

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