

Making the Stars Align in Your Healthcare System: The Growing Importance of Transparency in Patient Experiences

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Like with most things today, many of us turn to our phones, tablets and computers for information regarding our medical problems and where to seek treatment. While many providers have historically feared the five-star provider-rating system or web-based patient reviews, multiple studies over the past five years have demonstrated the growing significance that provider-rating systems have on the patient population. In an age of greater transparency, how a provider or healthcare institution is perceived by patients, and portrayed to the general public, is critical. Medical providers and healthcare institutions that ignore their online reviews and ratings, or fail to adapt to negative comments posted by patients, do so at their peril.

WEB-BASED RATINGS AND REVIEWS ARE GAINING CONSIDERABLE WEIGHT AMONGST PATIENTS

With the internet being at our fingertips, it is where the majority of the patient population is now looking for recommendations — whether it be a new primary care provider, a specialist or the best emergency room nearby. A recent study found that 94% of respondents consulted web-based forums — such as Google, WebMD, Yelp and Healthgrades — with some frequency to view or post comments and ratings for their healthcare providers. This was a notable increase from 82% in 2018, and a tremendous swing from 25% in 2013. Additionally, nearly 70% of respondents believe online reviews and ratings are “extremely” or “very” important in choosing a provider or healthcare institution. Another survey revealed that 95% of respondents found web-based ratings and reviews “somewhat” to “very” reliable. In fact, 41% of respondents still check a provider’s online rating even if that provider was referred by a physician.

Web-based reviews are paving the way to even greater levels of transparency, and clearly have become key tools for the majority of patients in terms of how they make decisions about healthcare. There are several reasons why a provider or healthcare institution should embrace this kind of transparency: (1) it provides patients with more information; (2) it improves patient care and patient experience; and (3) it cultivates better provider-patient relationships. Moreover, rating systems give patients a voice, and in so doing, provide valuable insight into how quality of care is gauged by the patient.

That is not to say all information put into online ratings and reviews of medical providers is useful or insightful. Various outcomes have been used to test a correlation between ratings and outcomes, including board certification, education, malpractice claims, mortality, infection and readmission rates. However, most studies show a weak correlation at best or no correlation at all. Thus, web-based rating and review forums are not the best methods to identify clinical competence of providers or patient outcomes.

The question then becomes why physician ratings and patient reviews are important. When taken in context, ratings and reviews provide useful information to the healthcare consumer, as well as the healthcare institution and providers, in terms of identifying and evaluating the factors that are important to prospective patients.

These surveys reveal the most common online patient complaints pertain to the following areas:

- ★ Issues with administrative staff
- ★ ★ Long wait times or unsatisfactory waiting rooms
- ★ ★ ★ Providers' knowledge/ability to answer questions
- ★ ★ ★ ★ Providers' bedside manner/attitude
- ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ Communication and scheduling

The good news is most patients leave positive reviews for healthcare providers. Only 2% of survey respondents reported leaving “very negative” feedback on web-based forums, and just 10% leave “somewhat negative” feedback. It is important to note that a negative review is not the end of your practice. There are productive ways to rebound from a negative review, and the response of the provider or healthcare institution and their ability to adapt to the negative feedback is crucial.

Healthcare institutions and providers should provide a thoughtful, professional response to a negative review online. Indeed, a large majority of survey respondents believe it is important for providers to respond publicly to online reviews. However, many individuals who have posted negative online reviews (51.8%) were never contacted about the concerns they expressed. Ignoring bad ratings and reviews does not make them go away. Nearly two-fifths of the survey respondents reported overlooking negative reviews if the provider responded to them thoughtfully. Further, 65% of respondents reported discounting unreasonable or exaggerated negative reviews. Thus, providers and healthcare institutions are encouraged to address ratings and reviews — good or bad — head on, provided it is done in a highly professional manner.

DEVELOP A STRATEGY FOR STREAMLINING RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE REVIEWS

Negative reviews should be used as a learning experience and a vehicle to enact positive change. One survey found that spending 10 minutes a week cultivating your online presence and addressing feedback publicly reduces the impact of negative reviews by up to 70%. Remember, though, any online responses to reviews become part of your online reputation. To assist providers with handling web-based patient reviews, healthcare institutions should develop strategies and resources to help providers deal with, and respond to, the occasional negative review in a positive way. Recommendations for providing insightful and professional responses include:

- Avoid getting defensive or asking the patient to remove the review or rating. Never respond to a negative review when you are upset or still processing the negative feedback.
- When ready, be sure to thank or kindly acknowledge the patient's review and keep it professional. Demonstrate your commitment to improving patient care and patient experience. You may even consider encouraging the reviewer to contact the office with any specific questions or concerns (without acknowledging that the reviewer was or was not a patient).
- Compliance with HIPAA and other federal and state privacy laws is still necessary, particularly in a public forum. Never publicly discuss patient specifics, even if the patient has shared something about her/his medical diagnosis or treatment.
- Consider designating an individual in your office or healthcare institution to be responsible for taking inventory of reviews, perhaps on a weekly or monthly basis. In addition to compiling information regarding how to improve patient satisfaction, this person may also reach out to dissatisfied reviewers, where appropriate, to discuss their negative experiences directly.



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- Remember, providers should embrace reviews and ratings and use them to enact positive change towards improving quality of care and overall patient experience. Encourage providers to keep patient experience in mind from intake to diagnosis, making all communications thoughtful and clear along the way.

If you have questions or would like more information regarding this subject, please contact Daniel J. Ferhat (ferhatd@whiteandwilliams.com; 215.864.6297), Laura E. Hutchinson (hutchinsonl@whiteandwilliams.com; 215.864.6231) or another member of the Healthcare Group.

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