

Handling Negative Online Feedback in Healthcare

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Seeing online negative feedback relating to you as a professional or your practice can cause significant stress and frustration, but think twice before you make any rash decisions to edit or delete. This will not be looked upon favourably.

Key recommendations

First and foremost, resist the temptation to respond angrily. Seek advice from a trusted colleague and/or the Australian Medical Association (AMA) or MIPS on the most appropriate way to approach the situation.

Consider the different ways in which you may respond. Depending on individual circumstances you might:

- ignore the comment
- identify the author/s and ask politely to withdraw the comment/s, or if appropriate, contact them directly to allow them to air their concerns
- ask the forum host to remove the offensive comments
- ask your practice to respond
- consider legal proceedings if the comments are false or have caused you reputational damage. (Initiating such proceedings is beyond the scope of your MIPS membership)

If you do choose to respond to a negative comment, make sure you don't inadvertently breach patient confidentiality. Evaluate the implications for the doctor-patient relationship and keep it simple, keep your tone as neutral as possible. One appropriate response might be; "Thank you for your comments. I am committed to improving my practice and have taken your feedback into consideration".

Consider blocking or muting incessant harassers. If you find repeated messages from someone upsetting or distracting, consider blocking or 'muting' them. Intimidators can be blocked from contacting you or be reported to the site. In addition, some online forums have policies and procedures for the removal of inappropriate or fake comments.

The AMA recommends reviewing the content advertised through social media on a regular basis, to ensure it complies with your

legal obligations under the following statutes:

- Australian National Law
- AHPRA Guidelines for advertising regulated health services in Australia
- AHPRA's social media policy
- Medical Board of Australia's Code of Conduct in Australia
- Medical Board of Australia's Good Medical Practice (if you are active on social media).

This equally applies to dental practitioners who should refer also to their own code of conduct.

While you are not expected to monitor social media platforms for comments made about you in websites and forums you don't control, you are responsible for the material you do publish or that which is within your control.

Key recommendations

You are responsible for your advertising. This applies to all content, whether published through social or traditional media.

You must not use a testimonial (solicited or unsolicited) that refers to a clinical aspect of care in your advertising, including on your website and social media account. Under AHPRA's guidelines, websites that invite consumers or patients' feedback/reviews about their experience with a practitioner are not considered "advertising of a regulated health service". Members should not encourage their patients to write testimonials on webpages they control, and they should delete any testimonial or positive reviews that are posted there.

Be mindful of the content you post online. Comments and images about your skills or services may inadvertently breach advertising guidelines.

Be mindful of online platforms' settings. Evaluate if you want your website and/or social media platform settings to allow users to leave comments. If you don't, disable the comment section.

Consider sponsorship of personal social media accounts carefully. Be mindful of how accepting sponsorship on personal social media accounts and/or supporting products for financial gain may reflect on you as a practitioner and/or influence your practice. You should be aware of any regulations that relate to the advertising of therapeutic goods by health professionals.

Using social media policy for advocacy

Social media can be a great tool to connect with others and create a sense of community. If you intend to use social media as an advocacy tool, AMA recommends you consider the following.

Identify whether you are speaking as an individual or on behalf of an organisation. This is critical. If you speak on behalf of an institution, ensure you identify the organisation and have permission to act as a representative. If you present a personal opinion that is contrary to the generally held belief of the profession, communicate this unambiguously to ensure the community is suitably informed.

Declare any real or potential conflicts of interest. Be upfront about this. In addition to being in accordance with professional standards, this may also protect you from any subsequent criticism. This applies also if you post anonymously. Any content written by authors who identify themselves as doctors is likely to be taken on trust by the public. Failing to declare conflicts of interests could undermine public trust, compromise your professionalism and in turn risk referral to regulatory authorities.

Be aware of your professional obligations if raising concerns in relation to a specific health service. Inform the appropriate authorities rather than raising these issues through digital channels. Make sure you understand your employer's policies regarding the use of social media to raise health service or environment concerns that may be critical of, or reflect poorly on, your employer or the wider health service.

Post content regularly and develop an informed, clear narrative. If you intend to use social media for advocacy on a specific topic, aim to deliver relevant content that is engaging, thoughtful, balanced and well-informed.

Monitor content, conversations and engage. Abide by your professional code of conduct and be mindful of your influence.

Avoid unproductive or inflammatory arguments online. When advocating online, it is common that all sorts of opinions are expressed. Refrain from participating in fiery debate and only engage with individuals who are willing to have reasoned and informed discussions.

Leverage the experiences you have as a professional in your sphere of influence to create change. Consider if the content you post is appropriate and abide by your professional obligations regarding patient confidentiality.

Be authentic. Stay true to yourself as a professional and what you stand for. Participating in genuine conversations about issues you care about will support what you aim to achieve.

References

A guide to social media and medical professionalism: The tips and traps every doctor and medical student should know
