

Handling Negative Online Reviews in Healthcare

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At some point, we have all 'Googled' our names, right? Imagine finding your name along with a star rating on a website accompanied with comments about your professional conduct. Websites such as RateMD, Whitecoat, Facebook and Yellow Pages all offer patients or any member of the public the chance to rate and comment on healthcare practitioners in a very public way.



Responding

While the number of cases remains limited, MIPS receives calls on occasion from members regarding unwanted criticism online. While there is some recourse available for practitioners to handle negative online reviews, it is limited and highly desirable to avoid launching a legal response which could further infuriate the patient.

If you are the subject of an unfair rating or comment, MIPS is inclined to think that replying to the comments within the review can 'fans the flames'. Requesting their removal through the site owner is the preferred primary approach.

In some forms of social media, you may block users from access to your account. This works well in Facebook or Google+ where the comments are on your 'wall/account' or are sent in direct messages, however, this is not available where you don't own the profile, which is the case with sites such as RateMDs and Whitecoat.

While you can claim ownership of the profile on RateMDs to block or censor material posted on your profile, this does mean you give credence to the site, validate the 'ghost' listing of you and give RateMDs your email. MIPS believes this is unadvisable in most cases because it may become an invitation for unwarranted criticism and potential libel to be posted. RateMDs' FAQ section states that "You can hide up to 3 ratings on your profile deemed to be suspicious. Please note that the actual rating connected to the hidden ones will still be represented in your overall star rating".

Forecast

Certainly, the laws and conventions of posting online are changing in some countries and it is good to see websites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter censoring material that is inappropriate, offensive and misleading.

Healthcare professionals are not alone in suffering the shame of slander/libel online and we anticipate the industry self-regulating with more automated review, manual review and banning people who continually post inappropriate comments. The scandal of fake reviews in the travel industry has already forced some self-regulation within that industry and MIPS hopes we see a similar effect evolve.

Recommendation

MIPS' recommendation is that if the offending post is not removed and/or you remain aggrieved and believe you may have been defamed, you could consider defamation proceedings. However, actions in defamation can be very difficult, expensive and jurisdictional issues can be complex, depending on where the website is based. If you are considering such a course, we recommend you seek advice from a lawyer with expertise in defamation law as MIPS is unable to assist in any initiation of proceedings.

Should members have any queries related to these issues they are advised to contact MIPS for advice on 1800 061 113.
