

# Handling negative reviews online

Reviews are part of our everyday lives – can you think of a product or service that isn't the subject of discussion on the internet? How often have you 'Googled' an item or business (or colleague!) to see how they compare to others?

Healthcare is no different to any other industry, and online reviews from customers. The fact that patients can, and do, leave reviews about their surgeons is very much a double-edged sword. Reviews can be a valuable marketing tool, with positive comments enhancing reputations and helping to build a practice. But negative reviews arguably draw much more attention, and can leave a practitioner feeling attacked.

Receiving negative feedback is unpleasant at the best of times, but when it's online for the world to see, what should you do?

## Don't panic

Any goods or services capable of being reviewed online can attract negative comments; there is no escaping it. It can be hard to read scathing comments from a patient, and how you react to it is crucial.

Consider the feelings of the patient and take a moment to acknowledge that they felt the need to write the review, even if you believe their comments are unjustified. It can help to compose a proposed response but not to send it.

Remember that you are not alone – many of your peers will have been through something similar. Instead of responding to the review, reach out to trusted colleagues for support and reassurance.

## Notify your insurer or indemnifier

Bear in mind that, depending on the content, you may be obligated to report a negative review to your insurers - check with your broker if you are in any doubt. If you do need to notify your indemnity provider, do this without delay and without responding to the review. Responding to a review incorrectly could escalate matters.

## Don't be a keyboard warrior

It is very easy to respond to a negative review by firing off a curt or defensive comment, which will almost always be visible alongside the original review. This is unlikely to provoke the desired response. Engaging in keyboard warfare in the public domain rarely makes anyone look good, and surgeons are no exception.

Approach the review with positivity, and keep your reply short, concise, and polite.

### DO:

- Get advice from your insurer on the content and tone of your response
- Thank the reviewer for their feedback – this shows a willingness to listen to concerns
- Apologise if appropriate – say that you are sorry that they felt the need to leave such a review, even if you believe that you have done nothing wrong

- Acknowledge the issues raised and advise of the steps you will take to address them
- Invite the patient to speak with you to discuss the matter further

#### **DO NOT:**

- Include details of the patient or their treatment in your response. This may be a breach of privacy
- Be defensive or dismissive
- Belittle the reviewer's concerns

#### **Should you remove the review?**

It can be tempting to ask the website holding the offending review to simply remove it. However, this is not always successful or even recommended. Prospective clients of an established business do not necessarily expect only five-star reviews. When a product or service has thousands of reviews, a long, unblemished list of gushing praise can look suspicious.

While excellent reviews will be reassuring to potential future patients, the reality is that adverse outcomes do happen. If a patient expected nothing but perfection from their surgeon, you would rightly suspect them of having unrealistic expectations.

Responding to negative reviews calmly and with empathy, rather than trying to have them erased, can demonstrate that you take feedback seriously.

There are of course circumstances where it is appropriate to contact the website to request that the review is removed. Defamatory, threatening or abusive comments necessitate a considered reaction and/or possibly escalation to the website host.

Keep in mind that some websites have very strict criteria for removing negative reviews, which can make it very difficult to have them taken down. If you do wish to have a review removed, then carefully check the terms and conditions of the website to see under what circumstances they will delete reviews. Some websites prohibit reviews being made by patients if they arise out of an investigation, complaint, or claim that they are involved in, or if the comments made are abusive or defamatory. You may also need to consider a website's own timeframes for review of your request, to avoid any perceived delays on behalf of the patient. If you do submit a request to have a review removed, make sure that you do not disclose any patient information.

Do consider that if you are successful in having a review removed the patient will likely be informed of this, which may then prompt them to escalate the matter if they feel slighted or silenced.

#### **Drive up your positive reviews**

One of the best steps you can take is to drown out the negative reviews with positive ones. Encourage your many satisfied patients to leave positive reviews to drive down the damaging comments and make them less visible.

#### **Move on**

Patients, like everybody else, are entitled to express their opinions online – and you can't please everyone! When you receive constructive feedback, learn from it and adapt if necessary. If you are the subject of a harsh review that truly has no merit but cannot be removed from the site, then you have no option but to try to put it behind you – focus instead on the many patients that will hopefully be thrilled with their results.

If you have any questions or require any further advice on handling online reviews, please reach out to PRASIS.