Protecting a physician’s ONLINE REPUTATION

Recognize, respond and react

BY DEAN MCCONNELL, JD

Patient complaints often share one common denominator—a breakdown in the physician-patient relationship. In today’s digital environment, where patients have the ability to voice their complaints openly, this can result in a negative online comment on websites like HealthGrades.com, RateMDs.com or Yelp.com, as well as on social media.

What should a doctor do in response? Ignoring a negative comment looks like you do not care or agree the comment is valid. Hiding or removing negative reviews may result in a re-post of the comment on multiple sites, pointing out your efforts to “hide the truth.” Attacking the commenter is dangerous and often results in more malicious or derisive comments.

A better option is to focus on repairing and preserving relationships with your patients based on the following:

- Recognize that you have an unhappy patient.
- Respond to the complaint in a positive manner.
- React based on a full and objective assessment of the situation.

RECOGNIZE

Recognizing that the patient is unhappy is difficult when you are feeling attacked. Negative comments invoke defensive reactions and fears that the physician’s reputation and practice may be seriously harmed. Despite these normal reactions, the patient’s concerns must be addressed in a professional and appropriate manner. Whether the patient’s complaints are justified or not, the patient is unhappy enough to make his or her complaints known to the world at large. Remember that this is only one of many patients in the practice, most of whom are very happy. While action is often prudent, it needs to be measured and appropriate to the context.

RESPOND POSITIVELY

Acknowledge that the patient is not satisfied and that patient satisfaction is important, and ask to take the conversation offline to address the issue. The written response should be tailored to the specific complaint. If a patient is unhappy about waiting too long for an appointment, an appropriate response might be: “Thank you for taking the time to comment. While we try to respect each patient’s time, sometimes the number of people who need our
help causes unexpected delays, especially when emergencies arise. If there is anything we can do, please give us a call at the office. Your satisfaction is important to us.” If the patient does not call, contact him or her. People will often say things online that they would never say face-to-face. A phone call provides a better chance of connecting with the patient and solving the problem.

Before responding with your own online comment, cool off. Let it sit overnight and ask a trusted colleague to review it before posting. Also, be careful about HIPAA. Do not include treatment or payment information or provide patient names or identifying information in your response.

**REACT APPROPRIATELY**

Sometimes patients are right. Maybe the physician was just having a bad day. An explanation and an apology is usually all that it takes to resolve this situation. Maybe the payment policy for “no shows” should not be absolute and can be waived for the mom who missed her appointment because she had to pick up her sick kid from school. Maybe the problem really is a rude front desk person and corrective action should be taken. Take this opportunity to evaluate the practice and improve it.

Sometimes patients are wrong. Nevertheless, they are still patients and may have had a bad day. In resolving these issues, communication with the patient is critical. Try to understand the situation from their perspective and consider whether there is some concession you can live with. Perhaps an explanation of how “no shows” affect the practice, a one-time waiver of the fee and a clear communication that future “no shows” will be charged. A good, long-term patient might be saved for the price of an office visit. Patients who have been heard will sometimes remove their own negative comment or, better yet, post a positive one extolling how the doctor cares about patients and was willing to listen and address the problem.

In certain situations, the physician may also want to consider whether this patient is just not the right fit for their practice, then provide a referral to a colleague who might be a better fit.

For the most serious violations—and as the last resort—consult an attorney about bringing a defamation claim.

**RALLY THE TROOPS**

Build a following of good patients online. Post a short blog on a health topic of interest. Ask patients to post reviews. These activities build a positive presence online and a negative comment will look like an outlier, possibly provoking positive responses from your followers. MM

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