Review and Rating Websites: Managing Online Reputation for Dermatologists

Online rating sites can lead to mistaken physician identities, inaccurate comments, and unfair negative reviews.

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The Internet has become the ultimate symbol of an individual’s right to information and the freedom of expression. As a result, there is plenty of good information about practising doctors and dermatologists available on the Internet. However, along with good information, there is also the risk of an equal level of misinformation and negative biases that find their way onto the World Wide Web.

The very nature of the Internet ensures so much freedom for every individual that it becomes difficult for a dermatologist to control and manage his or her professional reputation online. A number of rankings or ratings websites have also become popular, some of which are focused exclusively on physicians. While these websites present an opportunity for dermatologists to promote their practices through word of mouth publicity, they also pose the risk of creating unfairly negative or biased opinions against them.

**Types of Ratings Websites**

Doctor and dermatologist rating websites can be broadly classified into four categories. The first category is the no-fee sites that offer free information to patients about the listed doctors. Some of these sites earn their revenue through advertising, while others may charge a fee to the listed doctors. From a dermatologist’s perspective, it is relatively easy to control information on such a website because there is a financial tie-up between the site and the practitioner.

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The second category of websites are the ones that have no relationship with the doctors, but charge a fee to the patients to provide privileged access to information about doctors. The dermatologist can exercise little or no control over the views and reviews that the website may choose to publish about his or her practice. The third category includes insurance company websites, which have doctor reference sections, and give their own ratings to the listed doctors. The final category includes government-controlled websites that provide information about doctors licensed in their state.

**How Are Ratings Determined?**

Doctor and dermatologist rating websites usually follow one of the following three approaches to develop rankings or ratings. The first approach involves the use of an algorithm or a formula that attaches different weights to different sets of credentials of the doctor, such as education, experience and any special training. Some sites may differentiate even on the basis of the type of medical school a particular doctor attended. If the doctor has settled a
malpractice suit out of court, some sites may consider as a grounds to attach lesser weight to the doctor.

The second approach to determine ratings involves feedback from patients. The website will invite actual patients to rate their doctors on various parameters. Average ratings for the doctor are then computed on the basis of the feedback of different patients. The third approach is a hybrid of the first two, which is perhaps a more comprehensive way to develop ratings. However, rating a dermatologist still remains a highly subjective area because the opinions will vary widely from patient to patient. That makes this entire system of online ratings inherently controversial.

PROACTIVE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT
From a practising dermatologist’s point of view, it makes a lot of sense to be proactive in protecting and managing his or her online reputation. A growing number of patients are inclined to check out a doctor’s background on the Internet, and it may become an important influence in their decision to choose a particular doctor. The first challenge for a doctor is to ensure that the ratings and review websites maintain the latest updated information about the doctor’s practice. Most such sites do not have a system to ask for such updates and expect the listed doctors to provide updates on their own.

Patients may get mixed up where two or more doctors have the same or similar sounding names. It may lead to misplaced patient reviews and ratings about some doctors and dermatologists. Sometimes a particular patient may have made an unfair, false, or incorrect accusation, which can be countered only if the doctor takes care to tell his/her side of the story. Apart from damage control in such instances, the dermatologists also ought to reach out to ratings and review sites on their own to provide accurate facts so that the chances of misinformation are minimized.

CHALLENGES OF ANONYMOUS RATINGS
The Internet offers a great deal of anonymity, which can potentially be misused to make highly irresponsible, incorrect, or false statements online, without any fear of being held accountable for it. Many individuals also operate under pseudonyms on the Internet. So while they can hide their own identity and protect their own reputation, they can also potentially jeopardize the reputation of a dermatologist or another professional online. To tackle this challenge, Google Plus has taken the initiative and revoked the ability of users to post reviews anonymously, or even pseudonymously.

While this kind of restriction is a welcome step for most businesses and professions, it poses another unique prob-lem in the specific area of healthcare. Patients are usually willing to be most candid when their privacy is protected. Less than five percent of patients willingly give out their full names when providing feedback about a doctor online. Therefore, restriction on their privacy is a dilemma which may discourage patients from providing positive reviews and ratings about doctors and dermatologists on respected forums such as Google Plus.

HIRE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT EXPERTS
Dermatology practitioners who are looking to grow and expand their practices in their local area can no longer afford to ignore the marketing power of the Internet. They ought to have a professional and dynamic website that creates an outstanding image for the dermatologist and the practice. Second, such a website needs to be promoted professionally so that it achieves high rankings on all search engines, allowing maximum number of local patients to reach the website. Third, the dermatologist must be able to protect his or her reputation on third party websites on the Internet.

All three of these tasks can be performed efficiently and cost-effectively with the help of a professional SEO and online reputation management services provider. With the support of recognized experts in this area, it is possible to build an impeccable online reputation for a dermatologist, while following the highest ethical and professional standards.

It takes years to build a reputation. With the growing influence of the World Wide Web in our lives, it may be a smart move for practising dermatologists to take steps to build and protect their professional reputation online.

Naren Arulrajah is President and CEO of Ekwa.com. Ekwa Marketing is a complete Internet marketing company which focuses on SEO, social media marketing and the online reputations of dermatologists in the US, Canada and the UK. Visit them online at www.ekwa.com/pd to receive special information just for Practical Dermatology readers!

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