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Managing negative online reviews

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No dentist enjoys a negative review on social media. However, in this digital age, dissatisfied patients (for whatever reason) often resort to social media to “vent their frustrations.” Dentists are discouraged from responding to any negative reviews, but if they choose to do so, they should be very cautious when crafting a response. Failure to do so can have significant consequences as illustrated by the following case.

Case study

Dr. C was an experienced periodontist who rendered care for a patient on referral from her general dentist. The care consisted of treatment on a single date, and Dr. C thought the patient was satisfied with the treatment. However, the patient wrote a negative social media review about it. In her review, the patient did not identify herself, nor did she mention any clinical aspects of her treatment that could identify her. But Dr. C did identify the patient through the information supplied in the review.

To defend himself, Dr. C responded to the review and disclosed protected health information including the patient’s name. When the patient learned that this had occurred, she submitted a complaint to the state board of dentistry. After investigating the matter, the board sent Dr. C a strongly worded warning letter regarding this clear HIPAA violation.

Discussion

MedPro Group maintains a dedicated dental risk management hotline to assist its insureds with patient issues. Although these calls cover a variety of different subjects, a common concern is a patient’s negative social media review. Often, the doctor wishes to defend himself or herself from what he or she deems unfair criticism.

The doctor can contact the posting site (Yelp, Facebook, Angie’s list, etc.), but it is unlikely that the post will be removed at his or her request. If this effort has not been successful – as is normally the case – our most common recommendation is for the doctor to avoid responding to the criticism and just ignore it and move on (to the extent possible). Here is why:

- Responding to the negative social media post tends to draw further attention to it. The last thing a doctor wants to do is get into an online debate with a patient, drawing further attention to this controversy.
- There is the concern (as illustrated by this case) that patient confidentiality will somehow be breached and the situation will worsen.

If the doctor feels compelled to respond to the criticism, we recommend that a carefully worded, generic response be posted. These words may be helpful in writing



a response: “Anytown Family Dental strives to maintain the highest level of quality care and patient satisfaction. Anyone who is dissatisfied with any aspect of care delivered here is encouraged to contact Anytown Family Dental so that we may work to achieve your complete satisfaction.”

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Below are additional risk management strategies that dentists can implement in their practice to help address these challenges.

- As part of your organization’s communication and social media policies, develop a strategy for interacting with patients online, including responding to both positive and negative online reviews.
- Designate an appropriate individual to monitor the organization’s online presence as well as online reviews and comments about individual providers.
- Explore the possibility of using online alerts and other technology solutions to manage the organization’s and providers’ online reputations.
- Be aware of state and federal privacy regulations, and ensure that anyone responding to online patient reviews understands the obligation to protect patient privacy and confidentiality.
- In each circumstance, consider the best approach for handling the online review. Options might include (a) not responding at all, (b) responding online in a professional manner, or (c) contacting a known patient directly to address his/her concerns.
- Avoid responses to negative reviews that sound defensive, make excuses, or criticize the patient in any way. Additionally, avoid engaging in online arguments or behavior that might be considered threatening or unprofessional.
- Understand and reinforce the importance of treating

all patients with courtesy and respect and exhibiting professionalism in both in-person and online interactions.

- Consider online reviews a learning opportunity for both providers and staff. Review both positive and negative reviews and discuss how the organization can build on quality improvement processes.
- Encourage trusted, satisfied patients to post online reviews. Reviews that discuss positive experiences with the organization and its providers will help counteract negative reviews.
- Devise a plan for how your organization can use social media to build a positive online presence and share its mission. Doing so can help provide balance for potential negative feedback.

- Consult legal counsel or consider contacting a review site's webmaster if a patient posts information that is false or defamatory.

Conclusion

Being a victim of unfair criticism is always difficult. However, when it occurs in the professional context, the potential for a larger issue is certainly present. Utmost caution is recommended when considering how a doctor should deal with a negative social media review.

For questions or more information, MedPro-insured dentists may call 1-800-463-3776 (press 3 for risk management) to obtain assistance and recommendations from an experienced dental patient safety and risk consultant.

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