

# How to respond to bad online reviews

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In the age of online reviews, medical professionals have been accused of violating the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) for how they responded to negative online reviews from patients. To avoid that pitfall and other missteps, here are some do's and don'ts for responding to online critics.

## The pitfalls

A *ProPublica* investigation earlier this year, co-published with the *The Washington Post*, combed through more than 1.7 million patient Yelp public reviews and found dozens of instances where medical professionals' responses to complaints led to disputes over patient privacy.

In one case, a patient filed a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, the office that enforces HIPAA. The patient claimed the dentist posted her personal information in response to a Yelp review, according to the investigation.

In a 2013 California case, a hospital was fined \$275,000 for disclosing patient information to the media without permission, "allegedly in retaliation for the patient complaining to the media about the hospital," the article noted.

These online reviews are going to happen because that is the nature of the internet's presence in the modern medical landscape. So how do you handle them?

## The do's and don'ts of responding

With these pitfalls in mind, here are some dos and don'ts for physicians to consider when a patient posts a negative review.

**What to do:**

**Consider taking the response offline.** Phone the patient or invite him or her into your office to sit down and talk about their concerns. Sometimes, the personal contact results in the patient taking down the negative review, or results in the patient adding an online review that lets other patients know your office is listening.

**Speak about general policies and standard protocols if you chose to respond online.** For example, if a patient is upset he did not receive an antibiotic, a physician could respond, not by mentioning anything about the specific patient, but instead by saying that office policy and standard medical practice is to determine if a patient has a viral or bacterial infection and to only prescribe antibiotics when there a bacterial infection is present.

**Remember, one bad review will not destroy your online reputation.** Patients look at a physician's overall rating and when there are many good reviews, a few bad ones will not stand out as the norm.

**Establish your own online profile.** Get a professional headshot; make sure your information is up-to-date on your practice website, health rating websites such as Healthgrades and RateMDs, and other online sources.

**What not to do:**

**Don't respond immediately.** Take a deep breath and walk away. If you respond immediately, you may come across as angry. That won't lead to anything productive.

**Don't disclose any information about the patient—don't even acknowledge the person is a patient in your office.** HIPAA still applies. Even if a patient has disclosed his or her information in an online review, remember that HIPAA prevents a physician from disclosing any information about a patient without the patient's permission. A patient's own disclosure is not permission for the doctor to disclose anything.

**Don't ignore criticism.** Instead, objectively look at the criticism from the patient's point of view and determine whether there is something you or your office can do differently.

**Don't shy away from online reviews.** Ask your patients to rate and review you online. In most cases, reviews are positive. And remember that many positive reviews dilute many negative reviews.

## For more reading on how to manage an online presence

- | Social media: How to reap the benefits while avoiding the hazards
- | Physician behind KevinMD reveals how to leverage social media
- | KevinMD answers doctors' top social media questions
- | Will social media impact your residency, fellowship application?
- | Four tips for managing your online reputation