



Raising the Bar for Online Physician Review Sites

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There are more than 60 websites that review physicians online, with the number growing each year. A staggering number of physician searches—in excess of 3 million—are done each day in the United States. They have increased 68% from 2013 to 2014.¹ All online physician review sites provide some type of structured doctor experience rating score, and many allow comments from patients. Some sites also provide information about physician education, board certification, and hospital affiliation. The quality of physician review sites varies, just like the quality of those reviewed.

Physician review sites have not been embraced by the medical community and are often regarded by physicians with apathy, if not antipathy. There are many reasons for this reaction. The information on the sites—often gathered from flawed public and payer databases—can be very inaccurate; the number of patient reviews for each physician—orthopedic surgeons have an average of 12—is too limited to accurately represent a practice; and a single scathing review—frequently anonymous—can damage a physician’s reputation. First Amendment free speech laws allow patients to place their reviews anonymously, and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) prevents a physician from answering a negative review in anything but general terms. Under the federal Communications Decency Act, website providers aren’t liable for the postings of those who comment. Legitimate rave reviews may be deemed fake by certain websites and removed, and customer service is often a charade, with no one to speak to but a website computer. Most importantly, the review sites rarely represent the full breadth of a physician’s practice and reduce the physician to a simple star or numerical rating.

Like it or not, physician review sites are here to stay. In part as a result of the insurance changes created by the Afford-

able Care Act, patients are searching for new doctors online in unprecedented numbers. According to the Pew Research Internet Project, 72% of Internet users say they go online for health information.² A 2014 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that 59% of respondents indicated that physician rating sites were “somewhat or very important” when choosing a physician; 35% reported selection of a physician based on good ratings; and 37% reported avoidance

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of a physician based on bad ones.³ This is important information for an orthopedic surgeon to consider. Orthopedic surgery is the most frequently searched physician specialty on the Internet, and it is not uncommon for a busy orthopedist to have more than 1000 searches per year on just 1 review site. Consumer research data indicates that as many as 50% of patients who visit a review site call that physician for an appointment within 1 week.⁴ When a physician’s name is entered into a search engine such as Google, physician review sites are often listed above the physician’s own website.

Last year the California Orthopaedic Association (COA), responding to its members’ concerns, reviewed online physician review sites. As part of this initiative, the COA approached Healthgrades, a leader in online medical reporting of physicians, hospitals, and other health care providers. The goal was to understand Healthgrades’ perspective and to see if they were open to orthopedic input. The COA was concerned that review sites often had incomplete and inaccurate information about physicians’ practices, lacked orthopedic subspecialty designation, and precluded physicians from posting comprehensive information about their practices in their own words. Personalized practice information provided by the physician,

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the COA reasoned, especially if displayed prominently, would complement the patients' 1- to 5-star physician rating. Both prospective patients and physicians would benefit.

Three months ago, as a direct result of these collaborative efforts, Healthgrades made major changes to its review site. They increased the number of searchable orthopedic subspecialties, so that a patient with a specific problem is more likely to find an orthopedic surgeon with the right expertise. Physicians or their practice managers can now more easily update information about their practice, either online or by phone. Most importantly, Healthgrades added a featured section—"Your Voice"—prominently positioned next to their star rating, where a physician can describe who he/she is and what he/she does. This addition is not to be underestimated. No other major review site provides this opportunity to the physician.

Healthgrades should be applauded for their collaboration with the COA and the highly successful improvement of their physician review site. They have raised the bar and set an example that other review sites will hopefully follow.

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