

Factsheet: Responding to online reviews

This factsheet provides information for general practitioners about how to deal with online consumer reviews



What are online reviews?

Online consumer reviews are the new ‘word of mouth’ for recommending goods and services, including health services. Healthcare-specific directories such as [Doctors](#), [bestdoctors](#) and [RateMDs](#) allow users to find and post ratings and comments about medical practitioners. General business review sites such as Google reviews and Yelp are also used by patients to review general practices.

The difference between online reviews and word of mouth, however, is that online reviews potentially have a much larger reach and, once there, could remain in the public domain forever. The ubiquity of sites such as Google reviews means that customer reviews can be the first result that appears following an online search for a particular practice or practitioner.

This can lead to many professional and ethical problems for general practitioners (GPs) when considering when and how to respond to online reviews, especially if a review is unfavourable.

Someone has posted a negative review about me – What should I do?

Generally, it is recommended that you do nothing. The majority of online reviews of medical practitioners are positive¹ and, although negative comments might be distressing, most are not worth responding to.

If someone is ‘letting off steam’, or comes across as irrational, it is unlikely that their review will cause adverse consequences. It’s also unlikely that responding to that person’s review would lead them to change their perspective or achieve a mutually satisfactory outcome. Furthermore, it might result in an ongoing cycle of negative feedback.





When is it appropriate to respond to a negative review?

If you think that the review raises a legitimate point (whether it be about a clinical or administrative issue), and that it would be worthwhile addressing it, then it could be useful to respond. However, it is recommended that you avoid responding to reviews that discuss clinical issues, to ensure you don't inadvertently breach privacy or health practitioner regulations (refer below).

How should I respond?

The standard recommendations for any business responding to negative reviews also apply to general practices:

- be prompt
- stay calm
- be polite
- try to take the problem offline.

Remember, you must not breach a patient's privacy, no matter what they have posted themselves. This means that if the reviewer is identifiable, you must not confirm or reveal whether they attended your practice or any other information about why they attended, what treatment they received, or similar.

If possible, contact the reviewer directly, or invite them through the review website to get in touch with the practice directly to further discuss their concerns. However, even if you are able to directly contact the reviewer this way, you can't assume you are communicating with the actual patient, so be wary of writing anything that might breach a patient's privacy.

If you respond by posting online, the best approach is to keep responses simple. It is also recommended that you seek advice from colleagues or your medical defence or legal advisor. If the review relates to issues such as waiting times or your practice's facilities, you could respond in general terms about how you have or intend to address the issue, remembering not to breach privacy or confidentiality.

Finally, consider whether you want to take the feedback on board. The best way to avoid legitimate negative reviews is to maintain customer satisfaction. Negative reviews, no matter how annoying, could indicate areas for you, and/or your practice to improve on.

Can I ask the website to take it down?

If you believe a comment breaches a third party's website reviewing policy, you could contact the proprietor and request for the post to be removed. Check the website's terms of use or policy about posting content. For example, some prohibit personal attacks, swearing, fake content or posts by people with conflicts of interest. But most sites will not remove a review purely because you disagree with its content.

If you consider a review to be defamatory, request that it be removed on this basis. If this doesn't work, seek legal advice and, if appropriate, send a letter to the patient and/or website proprietor requesting removal of the post.

Someone posted a positive review. Can I use it on my website or social media?

The Health Practitioner Regulation National Law (the National Law) prohibits medical practitioners using testimonials to advertise their services.² 'Testimonial' includes reviews that recommend or make positive statements about clinical aspects of the service. Therefore, if you have received a positive online review that discusses any kind of clinical aspect, you cannot use it for advertising. This includes using it on your website or other pages that you have control over (eg a Facebook page).

You may use a patient's review in your advertising if it deals only with non-clinical aspects of their experience (eg parking access, the currency of the waiting room magazines) – assuming you have the permission of the patient and the website on which their review is published.



How much can I edit a review before I breach the advertising requirements in the National Law?

You are technically allowed to edit a review; however, you must not edit reviews in a way that makes your advertising misleading or deceptive. This means, for example, cutting out negative parts of a review or editing the review in any way that changes its meaning or gives an ‘inaccurate or false impression of the reviewer’s views’.³

It is very difficult to edit something without presenting an inaccurate impression of the writer’s views, and the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (AHPRA) cautions that any editing of reviews puts you at ‘high risk’ of breaking the law.³ The best way to avoid this risk is not to edit reviews at all, and only use complete reviews for advertising.

Do I need to keep track of online reviews that might breach the law?

No. You aren’t responsible under the National Law for content that is posted on third-party sites that you don’t control. However, you might breach the law if you respond to a review and your response is considered to be using the review to advertise.

Note that if your own practice website or other business pages (ie pages that you do have control over) have consumer review functions, consider disabling these functions to ensure you don’t inadvertently breach the law.

Can I stop patients posting reviews on other websites?

You can’t, but as the majority of online reviews of medical practitioners are positive, you probably don’t need to. You may also find reviews are a useful way to get feedback about aspects of your practise that you are doing well in – or that need improvement.

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Resources

An AHPRA resource about using testimonials in advertising is available at www.ahpra.gov.au/publications/advertising-resources/check-and-correct/testimonial-tool.aspx

An Avant article about how to respond to negative reviews is available at www.avant.org.au/news/when-patients-slam-you-online

References

1. Atkinson S. Current status of online rating of Australian doctors. *Aust J Prim Health* 2014;20(3):222–23.
2. Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Advertising: Strategy, legislation and guidelines. Melbourne: AHPRA, 2018. Available at www.ahpra.gov.au/Publications/Advertising-resources/Legislation-guidelines.aspx [Accessed 30 July 2018].
3. Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency. Testimonials in health advertising: A tool to help you get it right. Melbourne: AHPRA, 2018.

