



Catherine A. Mazzola, MD



Alison Dye

PROTECTING YOUR ONLINE IDENTITY



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According to most studies, 80 percent of consumers conduct searches online to find out information about doctors. So here’s my take on why it’s important for physician’s to protect their online reputation.

I finished my Pediatric Neurosurgical Fellowship at Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh in June 2002. I joined Hackensack University Medical Center Department of Neurological Surgery thereafter, and had been in practice for about a year when I logged on to the Health Grades website. I was looking for the address of a local pediatrician. After obtaining the information I needed, I was curious to see what information Health Grades had about me. Health Grades had me listed as a Pediatric Neurologist in Pennsylvania...just SLIGHTLY incorrect. I was unable to correct the information immediately. I had to create an account and certify that I was in fact, Dr. Catherine Mazzola. The whole process was not too difficult.

There are several “physician search sites” including Health Grades (www.healthgrades.com), Vitals (www.vitals.com), UCompareHealthCare (www.ucompare.com), and RateMDs (www.ratemds.com), that you should regularly check to update your profile and correct any misinformation. While much of the information on these doctor search sites is helpful for patients, the information must be correct in order to be “useful” and valid. Recently I updated my HealthGrades profile; while it took about an hour-and-a-half, it was relatively easy.

Additionally, physician rating sites allow patients and their family and friends to say pretty much anything they feel through public patient portals that allow patients – both grateful and sometimes disgruntled – to submit their opin-

ions about the care provided. Of course, we would all like to see glowing evaluations of our practice and performance. However, occasionally angry or dissatisfied patients can vent their frustration online and that can create a problem. Patients may become disgruntled for real or imagined reasons, some of which you have little or no control over. Patients may become angry about an insurance or payment issue or if you are delayed in the operating room, and they had to wait an excessive amount of time for their appointment. I have also had a patient become angry with my refusal to give her teenage daughter Oxycontin. Whenever the topic arose, I always had a witness with me and repeatedly referred her daughter to pain management and psychology for narcotic addiction. There are patients who may have psychological issues, or who may be in denial of their diagnosis. Some patients may have gain-seeking behavior, and those patients may become angry if you do not deliver the “diagnosis” or “disability status” they want. I have had patients become very angry when I have refused to complete “permanent disability requests” for them. I think that as a physician, it is important to realize that you cannot satisfy everyone. You have a higher responsibility to do the “right thing” for the patient, and this is not necessarily what the patient WANTS.

So how should you react to negative or inflammatory comments made online on one of these websites?

Use caution against a quick response. Make sure to develop a careful and calm comment, realizing that the patient who wrote the negative evaluation may SEE your response. Given HIPAA regulations, be careful to NEVER divulge anything about the patient’s identity or

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situation. Even if they use dates and times, you can’t refer to an actual event or occasion. Ask other patients to submit good evaluations which should “push down” the negative comments. You may also write a letter to the website manager, and ask them to take the negative comment down and “block” the sender, especially if the comments are untrue and hurtful. Again, in doing this, the author of the initial comments may become even angrier and submit more negative comments. In that type of situation, I would recommend speaking with a lawyer.

It’s also important not to forget about other online platforms (in addition to rating websites) which could house information about you and your practice. For most physicians there are some very simple steps you can take in order to protect yourself in this arena as well.

You may go to Google, Yahoo or Bing to search for yourself. Look at the first three pages of each search. Read what comes up in the searches. If there are postings that are incorrect, you may want to know more about who posted the information and where the information is stored. Then I would suggest

that you write a letter, requesting that the post be corrected or removed altogether. I would also recommend that you set up alerts on Google or Yahoo using different variations of your name (Dr. Jane Smith, Jane Smith MD, etc.). These alerts use keywords that search the internet looking for any mention of the keyword and when it finds a new mention it sends an email detailing where the keyword was found. Setting up the alerts is very easy. Simply visit <http://www.google.com/alerts/> create and put in the appropriate information.

Lastly, the best way you can steer online conversations in the direction you want is to be in control of your own brand by personally creating the content people see about you online. Whether you do this through a website, blog, or social media platforms I can promise you the effort will be well worth it to the 80 percent of consumers who flock to the internet to find out information about you. 