

Mixed reviews: critiques and compliments of physician rating websites

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In an era dominated by social media, physician rating websites are rapidly growing in popularity. Among these sites, *RateMDs.com* has gained the most popularity among Canadians. Launched in 2004, *RateMDs.com* features over 1.7 million active physician profiles across Canada and the United States and over 2.6 million posted reviews.¹ As of 2018, over 57,000 of these profiles were of Canadian physicians, representing well over 50% of actively practicing physicians in Canada.² Part of its appeal undoubtedly lies in its simplicity; any visitor may rate their doctor using a one to five-star rating system based on punctuality, staff, helpfulness, and knowledge, as well as narrative comments.¹ The entire process can be completed in a matter of minutes and, most notably, can be done anonymously.

While non physicians tend to view rating websites favourably, their rising popularity has been viewed less approvingly among some physicians, who argue that such sites do more harm than good.³⁻⁵ Among other reasons, these sites have been heavily criticized for the lack of accountability held by anonymous reviewers.⁶ Despite these criticisms, both Canadian and U.S. studies have found that posted ratings are predominantly positive.^{2,7} Negative ratings still occasionally take their toll, though, with some physicians going so far as to launch defamatory lawsuits claiming damaged reputation and loss of income.^{4,8-10}

As these rating systems rely entirely on the subjective experience of a patient, “hidden roles” of the physician, such as after hours paperwork, liaising with other providers, and lab test follow-up, are rarely taken into consideration. Moreover, unnecessarily ordering imaging and bloodwork or loosely prescribing inappropriate medications to quell patient concerns might be rewarded with positive ratings. In a similar manner, failing to perform these same tasks might result in a negative review—this places pressure on physicians to abandon guidelines and incorporate costly and potentially unsafe practices into the care they provide.^{11,12} Indeed, while patient-reported outcomes are crucial to the improvement of healthcare systems, patient satisfaction and best patient outcome are often at odds.¹³

Perhaps even more concerning is the fact that reviews are unverified. Consequently, there are no barriers in place to prevent an individual from posting a review that is grossly exaggerated or, in some instances, demonstrably false. Such reviews can understandably cause significant distress and even risk damaging the career of any physician who falls victim. Early last year, for example, an infectious disease specialist in Kingston, Ontario was involved in a defamation lawsuit following a series of slanderous comments posted to *RateMDs.com* and *OntarioDoctorDirectory.ca*. These comments, which falsely portrayed him as incompetent and a danger to his patients,

were ultimately revealed to be written by an individual who had never set foot in his office.¹⁰ In light of this and other similar cases, the Canadian Medical Protective Association (CMPA), a prominent medical malpractice insurer, has started to offer physicians advice on how to manage their online presence and, if needed, how to draft letters to offending websites requesting the removal of defamatory comments.¹⁴ Concerns regarding rating validity are not exclusive to negative reviews, however. In fact, a 2010 study of physician-rating websites revealed several positive narrative reviews that appeared to be written by the physicians themselves.¹⁵ Consequently, ratings on unverified physician-rating platforms should be viewed with a dose of healthy skepticism by patient and physician alike.

Despite several shortcomings of physician-rating websites, they also play an important role in patient-centred care, in that they empower patients to freely and openly share their healthcare experiences, both good and bad. If used appropriately, these online platforms also serve to benefit physicians by offering valuable insight into their medical practice from the perspective of patients. Such an opportunity is particularly helpful for reflecting on and honing the “soft skills” of medicine that are rarely formally evaluated throughout medical training and practice. As such, one cannot dismiss these platforms as entirely ineffective.

Regardless of how truthful online comments may be, the premise of anonymous reviewing raises another dilemma. While it is certainly true that receiving several complaints of a similar nature is likely to uncover an area needing improvement, the ability to openly criticize a provider who is unable to adequately address concerns without risking patient confidentiality inevitably leads to an uneven playing field.⁴ To help address this issue, online reputation management services have started to emerge. By distributing patient experience surveys that reflect the content of physician-rating websites, these services work to “drown out” negative reviews by collecting and submitting positive reviews, thus inflating a physician’s overall score.^{16,17} However, by selectively submitting positive reviews, such services themselves raise concerns about the reliability of online ratings. Similarly, there is no mechanism in place to prevent physicians from selectively encouraging reviews from patients who they believe will rate them positively, a technique that is well documented outside of medicine.¹⁸ However, for physicians who wish to remove particularly damaging or defamatory reviews, few options exist aside from pursuing legal action, which can be costly, timely, and laborious, or flagging comments for removal, which requires the review to be deemed inappropriate by the hosting website.¹⁹ As of 2018, a physician wishing to have negative reviews removed from *RateMDs.com* must purchase a package plan, which can cost anywhere from \$179 to 359 USD per month.⁴

While physicians should feel encouraged to monitor their profiles if they so desire, most will face some form of online criticism at some point in their career, whether it be through *RateMDs.com* or another online source. As such, ongoing efforts should be focused on improving the validity of these platforms in order to ensure content is

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accurate and criticisms are constructive. One plausible solution would be for these websites to incorporate a more scientifically rigorous psychometric methodology into the design of their rating systems, allowing a more reliable translation of subjective patient data into validated objective data. Although such changes would surely improve the current system, it is unlikely that this transformation will occur in the near future. In the meantime, physicians should feel encouraged to reach out to the CMPA with any questions or concerns regarding their online presence. Provincial physician-support services, such as the Physician Health Program of BC, are also available for physicians seeking guidance.²⁰ Regardless of one's stance on this issue, one thing is certain: physician-rating websites will continue to thrive for years to come. Perhaps it is time they were rated themselves.

Conflict of interest

The author has declared no conflict of interest.

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