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OCTOBER 3, 2018

MANAGING HEALTHCARE PROVIDER REVIEWS AND YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

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Say that you are a healthcare provider (either a physician or facility) who recently treated a patient. By all accounts, the interaction with this patient was uneventful and routine. Later, you learn that the patient posted an online review to various platforms, expressing dissatisfaction with their interaction with you. The patient provides a detailed account from their perspective, which includes several exaggerations and maybe even some fabrications. Your recollection of the interaction is very different than what the patient described in their review. How do you handle the situation?

We live in a society where consumers are looking for ways to make their voices heard. Online reviews of healthcare providers are on the rise with the emergence of healthcare rating websites such as Healthgrades, Vitals, or RateMD's, as well as social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and even YouTube. In 2015, a study showed that nearly one-third of patients used an online review platform to rate their provider. This number continues to grow. Patients are looking to share their healthcare experience with others, whether it is positive or negative.

People often use these sites and online reviews as a first step when seeking a provider, or to validate the choice of a physician they have selected. While the majority of

patient reviews are positive, no healthcare provider is immune from online criticism. However, the nature of a provider's response to a negative review can help mitigate any impact to the organization's reputation. In some cases, a well-thought out response can even turn a critique into praise.

Here are some best practices you should use when responding to online criticism:

- **Listen to the Criticism:** Patients leave negative feedback when they are angry or frustrated. Although the account of what occurred may not be completely accurate, don't simply dismiss the complaint. Negative reviews give you the opportunity to identify and fix a weakness within your process or personnel.
- **Resist the Urge to Fire Back:** When something negative is written, most of us feel the temptation to respond immediately and publically. It is important to take a moment and carefully craft a private and cordial response. Regardless of the original critique's context or tone, responding publically and perhaps angrily risks violating HIPAA laws and damages your own reputation in the process.
- **Take Conversation Offline:** Reach out directly to the patient if you are able to identify them from

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their online information. Many of these sites allow individuals to leave a review without registering or by posting anonymously. If you are unable to identify, post a generic reply encouraging them to contact your office directly so you can address their concerns. Oftentimes the patient just wants to be heard; once you listen to and address their concern, they may be willing to remove or modify their review.

- **Fictitious Reviews:** If the review is simply untrue, contact the website and asked to have it removed. In many cases, reporting a review may not result in having it removed if it does not violate the website standards, but it never hurts to ask.

MAINTAINING AN ONLINE PRESENCE

The internet is a powerful tool for all healthcare providers. More than ever, patients are using the internet as a tool to access health-related information and to research providers. They expect providers to maintain an effective online presence. Doing so doesn't have to be a gigantic undertaking either, but an effective presence should include the following:

- Healthcare providers of all size should maintain a practice website that provides information about the physicians including a short bio, and offered specialties and treatments. Many providers also offer a patient portal, where patients can schedule appointments, review their medical file, or pay their bill online. A website is a great way to provide content you control on the internet regarding your practice.
- Social media sites and blogs are becoming a popular platform for healthcare providers to share

information, engage with their patients, and to educate patients. Providers are using Facebook, Twitter, and even texting as ways to communicate with their patients. Of course, it is important not to share confidential health information through these media.

- Actively monitoring the available information on the internet is also crucial to maintaining a positive reputation. A provider should Google their name on a regular basis to see what information is out there. Providers should claim their profiles on physician rating sites and ensure the information on those sites is accurate. Additionally, encourage your patients to rate and share their experiences in order to continue to build a positive online reputation.

MANAGING THE RISK

The necessity of using the internet and social media platforms puts healthcare providers at risk, whether from shared unprofessional content that reflects poorly upon the provider or organization, or patient privacy violations. It is important that healthcare providers have a clear internet and social media plan in place that includes the online goals, level of engagement, and necessary internal resources to execute the plan. Additionally, only specific individuals should be authorized to post content on behalf of the provider, not only proactively, but also in response to criticisms. It is also important that staff expectations are clear and policies are in place regarding patient privacy and information posted on the internet by staff. Engage an experienced insurance broker to help your organization lay out an effective plan to protect against these risks.

References and Resources

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