

Online Reviews, Pediatricians, and the Democratization of the Parental Voice

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While physician reviews have represented a long-standing piece of the health care landscape, their role in the surrogate selection of the pediatrician has been less clear. The study by Hanauer et al¹ published in *Pediatrics* this month establishes the fact that review sites play an increasing role in how parent consumers choose providers. What might pediatricians keep in mind after reading this study?

PEDIATRICIANS ARE PART OF A BROADER PUBLIC CONVERSATION

It used to be that what parents understood about a pediatrician was based on face-to-face interactions and dialogue within a close personal network. Our communication was limited to the dialogue that happened in an examination room or the controlled sharing that happened in peer-to-peer journals. Our identity was defined by how we came across when we were in front of parents. This paradigm defined the “presence” of the pediatrician.

The networked world has changed that. Sure, we're still in front of parents much of the time, but we're also not in front of parents as often as they are on the Internet. We now have our digital, public presence to be concerned with.

Online reviews have “democratized” the parental experience and, as the authors discuss, have moved the doctor–parent relationship toward a more consumer-based model. Despite the wishes of some to remain anonymous online, physicians become part of the public discourse the moment they lay their hands on a patient.

PEDIATRICIANS CANNOT CONTROL THE CONVERSATION

As the authors note, physicians have sued patients over opinions and ratings, yet the fact remains that public dialogue cannot be controlled, it can only be joined. This has implications in how pediatricians view and support their online reputation. Attempts to limit a parent's right to share are likely to draw more attention to a negative review than the comment would draw on its own.

Rather than seeing themselves as potential victims of what others might say, pediatricians should create their story with strong health content and dialogue. When this happens, the good dilutes those reviews that may be less than flattering.

A DIGITAL FOOTPRINT EXTENDS BEYOND RATINGS

Despite the importance of reviews as reported here, physician reputation is determined by more than the average of ratings. Pediatricians must consider the entirety of their digital footprint when thinking about their online reputation. A digital footprint represents everything that a

parent understands about a pediatrician when looking online. Consequently, an online search remains an important entry into what patients can learn about their doctors. Pediatricians can and should play an active role in shaping what parents understand about them in the online space.

As Google CEO Eric Schmidt suggested in his book, *The New Digital Age*,² with greater connectivity will come greater expectations. Public presence will confer a market advantage for those who recognize its power. Absence in the marketplace will not be sustainable for individuals or organizations.

Although great reviews will never make up for bad medicine, the fact that public opinion is emerging as a new part of a physician's presence cannot be denied. Pediatricians should heed the data presented and recognize that the care they provide, for better or worse, has the potential to follow them.

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