

# Avant factsheet:

## Responding to negative feedback online



### Quick guide:

1. Negative reviews are confronting but will not necessarily damage your reputation, the key is how you respond.
2. Every situation is unique so the most appropriate course of action will vary each time.
3. Seek advice and consider your options before responding so you do not inflame the situation or breach your professional obligations.

Posting reviews about businesses or services on online ratings sites is increasingly common consumer behavior. Patients are also going to these sites to express satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with their health treatment. Facing such comments can be a new, and challenging, experience for doctors.

Dissatisfied patients may now go directly online without ever having raised concerns directly with the doctor or practice. Being told about online comments by another patient or colleague may be the first time a doctor becomes aware they even have an online profile.

There is no legal or professional obligation on doctors or practices to monitor comments on sites that are outside their control. If your online presence is not important to your business you may choose not to monitor or engage with any reviews. However, if you are concerned, the information below may be useful.

### The hidden benefit of negative reviews?

It is almost always confronting to read an adverse comment in an online forum, particularly if this is the first you have heard about the patient's concern. However while negative reviews can feel like a personal attack, they are not necessarily damaging for your practice. Many organisations have recovered, even improved their reputations following a full-blown media crisis, provided they responded well. Your first instinct might be to act angrily or defensively but, it is important to try to take a step back before you decide on any response.

It may seem counter-intuitive, but having some critical reviews may actually be helpful. A majority of consumers have said they trust reviews more when they see both good and bad scores. They are more likely to suspect reviews have been censored or faked when they don't see anything negative.

The Google algorithm relies heavily on reviews for the way it ranks a local business. It looks at factors such as the number and diversity of reviews as an indication of authenticity. Search engines also look for the number of sites (including review sites) that link back to your website, regardless of the substance of the reviews.

However, health practitioners should not ask patients to post reviews on online ranking sites – this could be in breach of AHPRAs Guidelines for Advertising Regulated Health Services.

### Consider the context before you respond

Many people do want to take some action when they find a negative review. There are a number of options, but no single best response, so you do need to consider the particular situation.

If a review is posted by a one-off patient or in relation to an isolated incident, you may be able to resolve or stop it from escalating depending on how you respond. On the other hand, sometimes negative comments do seem to be part of a pattern or sustained program and these may require a different approach.

Talking to someone before you respond can help. Your practice manager or colleagues may have encountered similar situations. Or you may wish to call Avant's Medico-legal Advisory Service (MLAS) for advice.

Always bear in mind that your legal and professional obligations apply online. You must avoid breaching the Medical Board Code of Conduct (Good Medical Practice: a Code of Conduct for Doctors in Australia) in your response.

### Responding to negative reviews – some options

#### Ignore the comments

While this may be difficult, ignoring the comments is an option.

Sometimes comments seem unreasonable, for example a patient complaining that you did not agree to a procedure that you did not believe was in their best interests. If you do not think there is actually an issue and other patients are generally happy, you might choose simply to let the comment go. Other patients may respond or post positive reviews and balance out the negative rating.

Even if you choose not to respond it can be worth monitoring the situation to make sure this is just a one-off.

## Discuss the complaint offline

Unfortunately it is not always possible to identify the author from an online comment. However if you do know who has complained, it may be appropriate to contact them offline and discuss their concerns.

You could say how sorry you were to hear that they had a bad experience, and investigate the complaint. If it is resolved, the author may offer to update the comments, or have them removed from the website.

Consider whether this approach is appropriate based on your knowledge of the person complaining and the nature of the comment. There is a risk that contacting them could escalate the situation.

## Administrative complaints – consider replying online

If the review raises administrative issues such as waiting times or parking conditions, your practice manager may wish to reply online.

This approach works best if you can respond in a timely fashion. It can show empathy with the patient and willingness to respond, and can give a positive impression for anyone reading the comment online.

However if the comment was posted months or even years ago and the issue has gone away, it is usually best not to respond and risk stirring it up again.

If you do respond, there are some guidelines to bear in mind:

- Avoid breaching patient privacy.
- Acknowledge the concerns.
- Take the complaint offline if you can, for example by inviting them to contact the practice directly.
- Avoid being defensive, even if you don't agree with the complaint.
- If possible explain what you have done or are doing to address the issue.
- Try to write as you would speak. Stock phrases can sound insincere.
- Follow through on any promises to act on the problem and then communicate what you have done.

## Clinical complaints – consider acknowledging but do not respond online

If the complaint is about a clinical issue, you or your practice manager may wish to make a general online response apologising and acknowledging the concerns. Keep it very general and try to take the conversation offline. You need to be particularly careful not to breach patient confidentiality in any such post.

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## Request the website host remove the offending comments

If the review breaches the individual platform guidelines you may be able to get it removed. Typically guidelines cover areas such as offensive comments, hate speech, defamation, fake or misleading content and other forms of restricted content.

Platforms can vary in terms of how strictly they interpret these guidelines. Some are more likely to comply with your request to avoid the risk of further action against them. Others generally take the position that consumers are allowed to express their honest opinions. These platforms may only act if they are convinced comments breach their guidelines.

Generally we advise that you or your practice manager, as representatives of your practice, start the review removal process yourself.

The time a platform takes to review and decide whether to remove a comment can vary. Please contact Avant's Medico-legal Advisory Service (MLAS) on **1800 128 268** for detailed information on website guidelines and instructions for how to best approach each key online review platform.

## Consider legal options

Unfortunately some doctors do experience online comments that go well beyond patient complaints. Sustained and co-ordinated attacks or abuse, online stalking or bullying, or other behaviours that make you fear for your safety may constitute cybercrime.

If you experience any of these behaviours there are a number of options available. These might include reporting to the Australian Cybercrime Online Reporting Network (ACORN), contacting police, or taking out an intervention or protection order.

Online comments may also breach Australian defamation laws. However legal action for defamation can be difficult to win and difficult to enforce. Further, the defamation process will involve airing the negative comments and may actually increase any negative public perceptions. This is an evolving area of law and always depends on the specific situation.

## Looking after yourself

Dealing with adverse opinions online can be stressful. It is important to take care of yourself and seek support if you need it. Please see Avant's [Health and Wellbeing](#) resources for more information.

## Additional resources

You can find additional resources in the Avant Learning Centre [avant.org.au/avant-learning-centre](http://avant.org.au/avant-learning-centre)

For more information or immediate advice, call our **Medico-legal Advisory Service (MLAS)** on **1800 128 268**, 24/7 in emergencies.