

Swapceinski and his colleagues have strived to make RateMDs a better service. They now delete duplicate ratings from a single user, so no individual can single-handedly ruin a doctor's reputation. If possible, they track physicians who move to new areas with hopes of escaping their pasts. And though people can comment anonymously, there is still a degree of accountability. Swapceinski receives, on average, one subpoena a month from a lawyer for a doctor intending to sue a person for making a false accusation on RateMDs, and he will surrender that user's IP address.

"I have no problem with that," says Swapceinski. "If someone slanders a doctor and it's false, they should be punished."

Physicians who feel they are being unfairly maligned can also respond to online ratings, though they have to be careful about it. Responding quickly in anger might lead them to inadvertently breach doctor-patient confidentiality. And some comments just aren't worth responding to anyway, says Dr. Mike Woo-Ming, a physician turned Internet business consultant and the CEO of RepMD (repmd.com), a company based in San Marcos, California, that helps physicians improve their online reputations.

"If someone is just calling you every name in the book, you might not want to respond," says Woo-Ming. "But it is fine to respond to a review in a way that shows you care about the patient and indicates you are striving to improve."

Merely posting the occasional rebuttal, however, is hardly enough to combat negative reviews, many of which may not even have been written by patients, says Woo-Ming. Because it is anonymous, a nasty rating could very well be the work of a disgruntled former

employee or a physician competing for the same patients. Even legitimate reviews tend not to depict an accurate picture of a medical practice, because most people who are happy with their doctors don't bother to post comments.

"What's frustrating for some of these doctors is that they may have been in practice for 40 years and have only two comments online, but both are negative," says Woo-Ming.

A handful of negative ratings, without a healthy supply of positive ones to counter them, can cause harm not only to a physician's reputation, but also to their income. It can serve as useful ammunition for malpractice lawyers. It can make it harder to sell a practice. If you happen to take over a practice from a poorly rated doctor, that reputation tends to linger.

RepMD, which has hundreds of clients across the United States and Canada, helps physicians improve their online reputations in several ways. Woo-Ming would not disclose how much he charges for reputation management, writing in an email that "it really is dependent on how bad the situation is, and we price accordingly, and a specific dollar value could give the wrong impression."

Others in the reputation management industry appear to charge on the order of US\$1000–US\$1500 per month to polish tarnished characters. Reputation Hawk (www.reputationhawk.com) and Online Reputation Manager (www.onlinereputationmanager.com) both display prominent "request a quote" buttons on their websites, and the latter states its average price is around US\$1000 a month. The prices at Reputation Managers (reputationmanagers.com) start at US\$1500 a month, but also vary widely according to the complexity of the job.

Services provided by RepMD include

requesting that ratings websites take down particularly egregious reviews (such as unsubstantiated claims of criminal activity), assistance in setting up physician websites (that can be linked to from ratings websites) and creation of an internal patient feedback process in medical practices (which will solicit positive comments to be posted to various physician ratings websites).

"Most doctors don't take the time to find out what their patients are actually saying about their experiences. Doctors need to realize they are in the customer support business," says Woo-Ming. "Patient satisfaction is going to become even more important, and your online reputation is going to be of greater importance. It's not going to go away." — Roger Collier, *CMAJ*

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Editor's note: Seventh in a multipart series on medical professionalism.

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