

How Effective are Online Ratings of Doctors?



Physician ratings websites are intended to make patients better-informed consumers of healthcare, but some doctors worry that complainers will be the most outspoken contributors to rating sites, skewing scores and making the ratings less reliable. A new study, however, finds that that fear is unwarranted.

Researchers compared the ratings of 1,425 doctors in three metropolitan areas — Denver, Kansas City and Memphis — on the popular site RateMDs.com against surveys of patient satisfaction conducted by Checkbook.org, a nonprofit consumer research organisation.

The researchers found a correlation between the online ratings and the very thorough surveys of patient satisfaction, which indicates that the online ratings were representative of a broad spectrum of the patient population. Surprisingly, analysis also revealed that physicians who did poorly in the surveys tended to receive fewer online ratings than those who did well — the opposite of what you would expect if people with bad experiences dominated the ratings.

"The concern that ratings aggregation sites will become digital soapboxes for disgruntled patients appears to be unfounded," notes the research team, which included Gordon Gao and Ritu Agarwal (both from the Robert H. Smith School of Business, University of Maryland); Brad N. Greenwood of Temple University; and Jeffrey McCullough of the University of Minnesota. Gao and Agarwal co-direct the Smith School's Center for Health Information and Decision Systems (CHIDS).

The effectiveness of online ratings is a subject of intense interest that is only increasing: Some 37 percent of patients have consulted a ratings website when they sought healthcare. The new study also found that online star ratings seemed to be most helpful for distinguishing doctors in the middle 50 percent of performance (as measured by the surveys). A "hyperbole effect" was evident for doctors in the highest-performing and lowest-performing quartiles: Their rankings tended to group together, meaning that small differences in star ratings had no significance.

The current study focused on evaluation of patient satisfaction and did not look at objective measures of patient outcomes, or protocols doctors followed. A previous study, by Gao and four co-authors, found little statistically significant connection between patient ratings on eight websites and objective measures involving 1,299 internists.

"This is what we should keep in mind: A very high score in patient satisfaction is not wholly connected with clinical quality," Gao points out. "If you want to use the online ratings to infer how good a doctor is clinically, take them with a grain of salt."

Source: [University of Maryland](#)
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