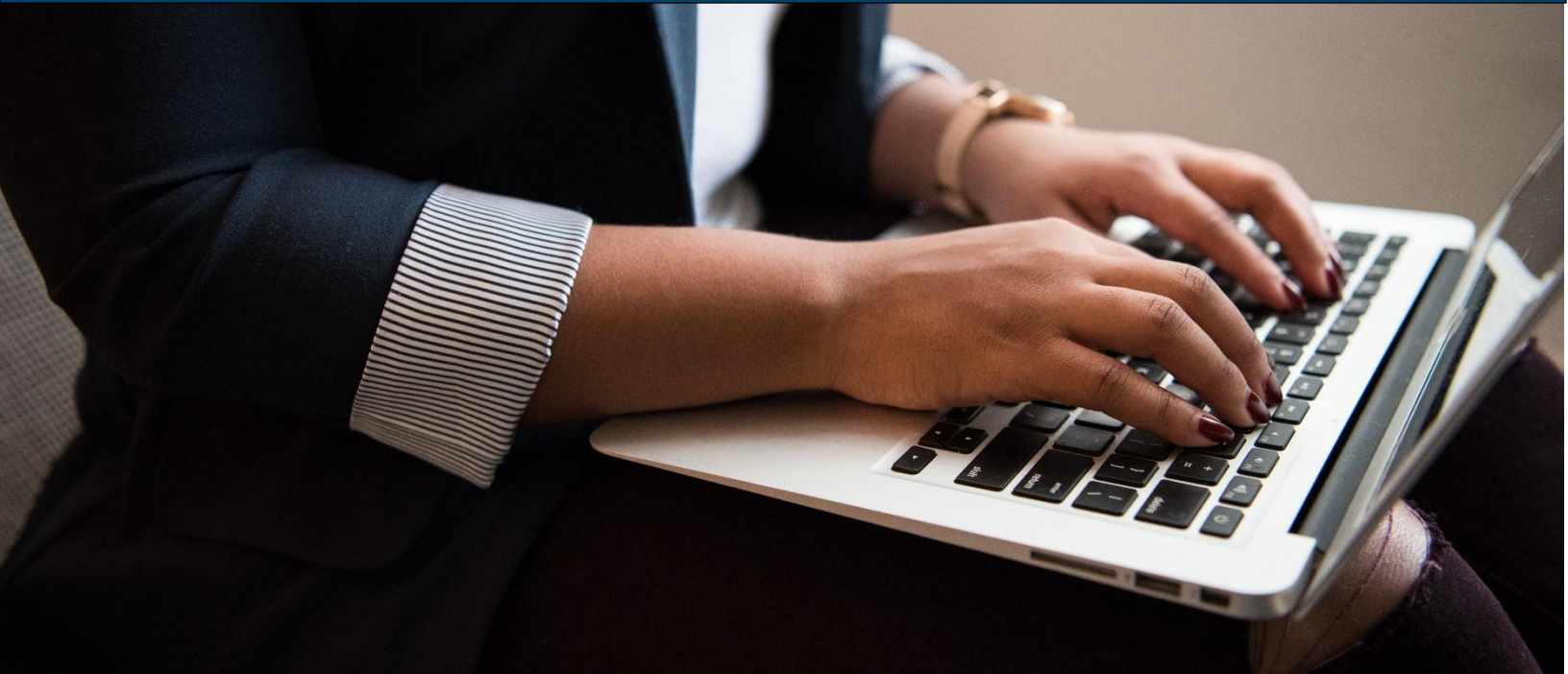


Online Reviews of Dermatologists: Friend or Foe?

By Dr. Miesha Merati



Fifteen years ago, when most people did not own smart phones, the thought of writing an online review of a physician was absurd.

Rightfully so, patients prefer compassionate, competent doctors at well-run clinics with a courteous staff. Yet, the instinct to read reviews for guidance intrudes upon the personal aspect of the doctor-patient relationship. Rather than the traditional reliance on suggestions from friends or colleagues, or a doctor's experience and credentials, many patients prefer quick and accessible reviews.

Online platforms like Yelp, ZocDoc, and Vitals allow patients to effortlessly showcase their experience with a doctor for public scrutiny. In some cases, these avenues may influence behavior and practice patterns for many clinicians. A practice's online image may be the most burdensome liability or favorable asset to a clinic, especially in highly-saturated areas. Management of online presence is time-consuming and utilizes practice resources that could otherwise be used to enhance patient care.

Reviews, regardless of a product, a restaurant, or a physician, are subject to misrepresentation.

Anecdotally, dermatology practices will provide free goods or discounted services in exchange for an honest review from the patient, yet this creates selection bias by handpicking the happy patients. One may argue that only exceptionally satisfied or disgruntled patients make the effort to write a review. Those who are upset with a substantial medical bill, or a staff member may also leave an unrelated review of the doctor, and this may be viewed as an unfair representation of the physician. Unfortunately, platforms like Yelp do not easily remove these slandering reviews, even if the patient is not yours. In fact, Yelp has been under tremendous scrutiny for soliciting a hefty monthly fee (upwards of \$350) under the guise of advertisements to highlight only good reviews, and remove bad ones, at your request.

If reviews have potential for bias and misrepresentation, how useful are they? Despite this, most provide honest feedback that are quite useful.

As dermatologists, we are accustomed to being at the top of our class, receiving the highest accolades and respect from our mentors and educators. We do not take criticism lightly. Yet, don't lose sight that reviews may also serve as a benchmark of our performance, the patient's experience with the medical personnel, or even office flow. Let the comments of disapproval help us improve our skills, our interaction with the patients, the wait times, the variety of services offered, and our hires. Satisfied patients are more likely to adhere to their regimens, ensuring treatment success, and proper follow-ups. Contrary to popular belief, happy patients do write reviews; they can help your practice or patient population grow, especially in a competitive market. Understand that we cannot make everyone happy.

Embrace the negative reviews that provide honest feedback of your performance as insight on how to enhance your professional skills. Despite our personal preferences, public reviews are certainly here to stay for good.