

HOW PATIENTS RATE DOCTORS

A website allowing UK patients to rate their doctors upset many people, but similar systems are well established in the US. **Janice Hopkins Tanne** reports

Suppose you're an ordinary American and you need to find a new doctor. What should you do? You could ask your friends and work colleagues. Your health insurance company will give you a list of doctors, but they are usually listed by the distance from your home or office. If you know the names of some doctors, the American Medical Association provides basic information about most US doctors through its Doctor Finder service, as do most of the state agencies that license doctors. (In the United States, doctors are licensed by the individual states.)

But those sources don't answer many of the questions patients want answered: is it easy to get an appointment with the doctor? are the office staff efficient? is the doctor pleasant? is he or she good at explaining things?

What you need is the equivalent of a Zagat restaurant guide, which collects and correlates diners' ratings, for doctors. In fact, US patients have more than two dozen guides, including one from Zagat to turn to. Some doctor rating websites are just somebody's opinion and

are run by entrepreneurs. But large insurance companies have also set up more organised systems to survey their members and share the information.

Rating approaches

Some sites are free, such as RateMDs.com, DrScore, Vitals, and Revolution Health. Others, like HealthGrades, offer some information free and will provide more detailed reports for a fee—\$29.95 (£16; €20) for a report on one doctor, \$9.95 for a report on a second doctor.

RateMDs.com was cofounded in 2004 by entrepreneur John Swapceinski, who founded the RateMyProfessors site in 1995. RateMDs is, he says, “free for all users, owned and managed by patients, not beholden to doctors and associations.” Mr Swapceinski started the site because there was a dearth of information about professional services, although such information could be of life or death importance. The site gets about half a million visitors a month and is growing, he says.

The RateMDs website contains nearly 565 000 ratings for more than 156 000 doctors and dentists in the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia, and India and an average of 600 ratings are added every day.

About 60% of the listings are US and 30% Canadian. Many more doctors are listed but not rated. The list includes links to the state licensing boards, which often have information about the doctor's professional credentials.

Comments on the site about the same doctor vary from, “Very caring . . . he cured me . . . when other doctors dismissed my symptoms” to “Worst bedside manners I ever encountered. Was referred to him for my . . . condition, which he knew nothing about.”

The average number of ratings for each doctor is three to four, Mr Swap-

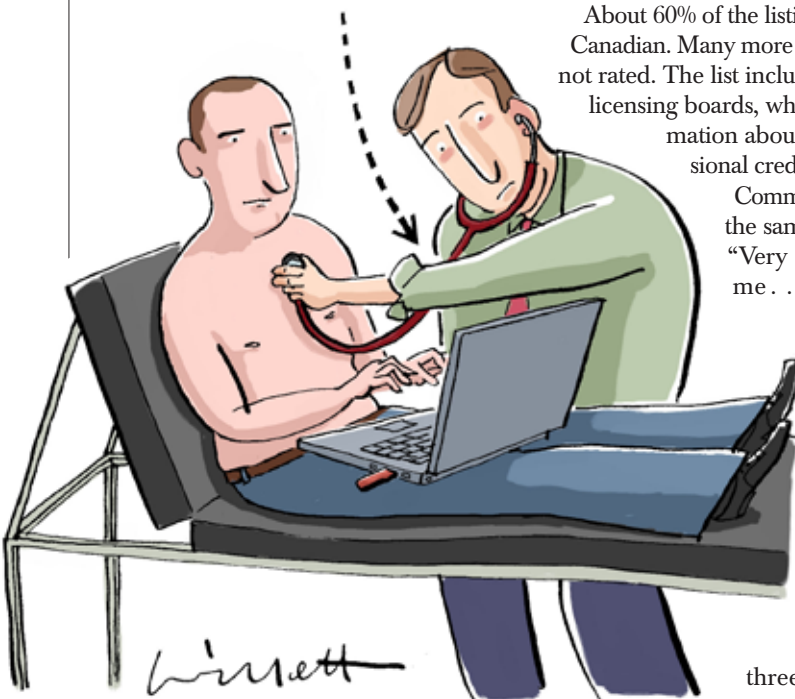
ceinski says, but some have as many as 20 or 30 and some doctors ask their patients to rate them. The service tries to prevent multiple ratings from the same source and to delete questionable ratings. By far, most comments are favourable. Doctors can reply to posted complaints and explain their side of the story.

A Zagat guide to doctors is now a reality. The international restaurant rating company has teamed with WellPoint, an American health insurance giant with 35 million members, to allow consumers to rate their doctors and share the ratings. Consumers can score doctors on trust, communication, availability, and environment, using a scale of 0 (fair or poor) to 3 (excellent). The scores are averaged and translated into Zagat's 30 point scale, says Jill Becher, WellPoint's public relations director. Ratings are not displayed until a minimum number are collected. “An entry will display the ratings . . . as well as the percentage of consumers who recommend that physician,” she says. No information about the person who made the rating is revealed to doctors or other consumers. The site also has a section where patients can add written comments.

Ms Becher said, “This rating system is intended to convey a patient's overall experience at a given doctor's office.” It began in January and has received a positive response. “Nearly 90% of consumers completing reviews [are] recommending their providers,” she said.

Later this year, when at least 10 ratings have been collected for a given doctor, they will be displayed online. Doctors will be able to view survey results as consumers see them, but they won't be able to respond to comments or rate themselves. The ratings will not be tied to benefit or physician reimbursement levels or performance assessment, Ms Becher said. She said the rating tool was developed to give members a way to share with other members their feedback and experiences with physicians. “Consumers want to know what other people think. Now there's a way to get recommendations from 35 million people across the country, and get it in a format that is familiar, easy to understand, and meaningful. If a by-product of this tool is that a physician chooses to change or improve his/her practice based on the feedback that one of

Warm manner,
cold hands...



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his/her patients provides, then that is great,” she said in an email message.

Other health insurance companies have hit controversy with their rating systems. Four major companies were accused of attempting to steer patients to the cheapest doctors rather than the best ones. Pressed by the attorney general of New York State, Andrew Cuomo, the companies agreed to alter their rating systems last year.

A big commercial ratings company, HealthGrades, is listed on the US stock market. It has been rating or profiling doctors, hospitals, and nursing homes since 1998. Company spokesman Scott Shapiro said most of the information about doctors was free and included contact information, educational details, quality ratings for the hospitals a doctor was affiliated to, and results of patient experience surveys.

Consumers can get information about a single doctor or can compare several. Those who pay for a report from HealthGrades also receive information about malpractice (for 17 states) and sanctions (disciplinary actions) against a doctor (for all 50 states), board certification, and information about the costs of particular procedures and treatments by the doctor. The paid reports also included general questions that a patient might find helpful when seeing the doctor. For a serious procedure, the patient might ask “how often have you performed this procedure?” or “what are your mortality rates for this procedure?” or “who will provide care if you are not available?”

HealthGrades compiles its information from the federal Medicare and Medicaid insurance programmes for elderly and poor people, from several states’ records, medical boards for all 50 states, publicly available directories, and telephone surveys. Physician data are updated quarterly.

Doctors can’t change their information, but they can add more. “Some are giving photos and videos, like a three or four minute talk about their practice, their background, and their specialty. Physicians can put information to attract the patients they want,” said Mr Shapiro.

HealthGrades says that every month more than five million consumers visit its website for information about doctors, hospitals, and nursing homes. Several big health insurance companies contract with HealthGrades to make its ratings available to their members or employees.

The company has recently added a feature that allows a hospital to sponsor a report about a doctor, and in this case all information is free on the web. The information serves as promotion for the hospital and the doctor, and helps to attract patients. A typical report includes a statement by the doctor about their training, practice, special interests, and philosophy, plus a photo. It also has a Google map so that users can see where a doctor’s office is located.

DrScore, established by Steven Feldman, a dermatologist at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, takes an unusual approach. He says the idea of rating a doctor should not be controversial because ratings help doctors do better. A patient may receive excellent medical treatment but be dissatisfied because of his or her total experience in the doctor’s office. Instead of trying to do patient satisfaction surveys in their practice, which can be costly and difficult, he suggests that doctors encourage patients to post anonymous ratings on the DrScore website. So far more than 700 doctors have signed up for his service at a cost of \$150 a year, and more than 50 000 ratings have been received.

Doctors’ views

Doctors might be expected to be unhappy with anonymous remarks on various websites that they are incompetent and rude, have a filthy office, and keep patients waiting for hours. Indeed, a few have tried to sue, without great success. Federal law permits websites to host other people’s content without being liable for defamation or libel. The Supreme Court of the United States has held that anonymity of speech is protected under the first amendment to the Constitution.

Other doctors, like Gary Berger, are quite happy with the rating system. Dr Berger, an obstetrician and gynaecologist in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, has the most ratings (98) on RateMDs website. He specialises in reconstructive surgery of fallopian tubes, called “tubal reversal,” and has glowing ratings from most patients.

Dr Berger said he thought doctor ratings “would be potentially useful for someone to try to find out about a doctor they haven’t seen,” although they should be used with caution. If a patient posted a complaint, it would be difficult for a doctor to respond because of professional ethics and the US privacy rules (the Health Insurance Portability and

Accountability Act of 1996); also the doctor would need the patient’s permission.

Dr Berger actively seeks feedback from his patients. His staff send out questionnaires 10 days after surgery asking patients to rate their care. A nurse contacts any patient who expresses dissatisfaction, and staff have quarterly sessions to evaluate improvements.

Dr Berger may be happy, but organised medicine is not. The American Medical Association says, “Some [online opinion websites] allow postings to be published anonymously, and there is no guarantee that the opinions about a physician even come from that physician’s patient. People may express dissatisfaction on these forums because they wanted a medication that wasn’t medically necessary, or because they didn’t receive a prescription or service that was delayed or denied by their insurance company. Online opinions of physicians should be taken with a grain of salt, and should certainly not be a patient’s sole source of information when looking for a new physician.”

Jeffrey Harris, president of the American College of Physicians, which has 126 000 members, said it was useful for doctors to be able to provide biographical and practice data on the websites, and the college “applauds the notion of an objective means of assessing the quality of care,” but he was sceptical about the rating websites. “Do they represent a fair cross section of the population?” he asked. He was also concerned about the difficulty of finding unfair information and correcting it.

Instead, he advocated the *Patient Charter for Physician Performance Measurement, Reporting, and Tiering Programs*, which was launched in April by the American Medical Association, the American College of Physicians, the American Academy of Family Practice, the American College of Cardiology, and the American College of Surgeons. It has been endorsed by leading business, consumer, and health insurance companies.

The charter calls for performance standards that are “based on the best available evidence and align with national standards, including those endorsed by the National Quality Forum.” Physicians must be able to examine their quality related information and correct any errors before the information is released to the public.

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