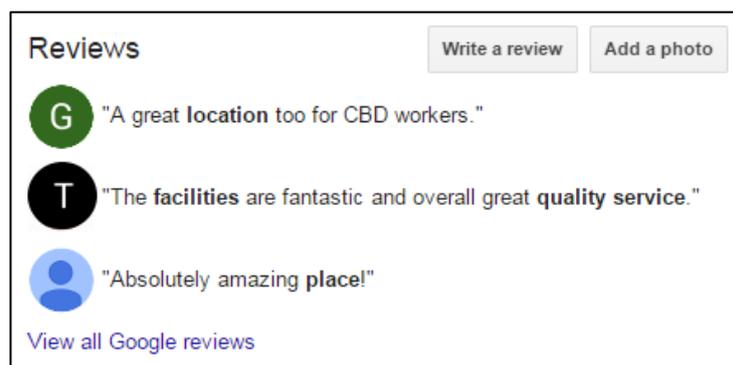


Google reviews and health practitioners



Google reviews can be problematic for health practitioners.

Patients may enter a search query into Google's search engine for a health practitioner or a practice, and the results may show up as set out below, along with relevant photographs, address, opening hours and contact information.



Obviously, there is nothing concerning about the above reviews because they are all positive.

The problem arises when the reviews are unfavourable to a practitioner or practice, particularly when the reviews are presented along with the relevant practice or practitioner in Google's search result.

Are the reviews prohibited advertising?

Advertising of health services is regulated by the National Law, and more specifically in the advertising guidelines issued by the National Boards – click [here](#) for more details.

Generally speaking, reviews, 'testimonials' or purported testimonials are prohibited about health services. So, if the practitioner or practice has control over the relevant advertisement none of those things should appear in the advertisement. Relevantly, that includes any website, Facebook page, or LinkedIn page. That prohibition does not extend to websites that are outside of the control of the health practitioner, or practice such as 'RateMDs', or 'Word of Mouth'.

Google reviews are another example of the reviews being outside of the control of the health practitioner or practice so the reviews usually would not be in breach of the advertising guidelines (assuming a health practitioner or practice has not generated, or otherwise encouraged the reviews).

What to do with adverse reviews?

Patients are entitled to express their opinion on the health services they receive, provided certain requirements are met, such as it being an honest opinion, and based on facts disclosed or identified in the relevant expression of the opinion. That includes appropriate adverse reviews.

If the review is adverse, the simplest option is to raise the issue with the reviewer, or to respond to the review on Google reviews. That might involve a discussion around amending the review if the practitioner does not believe it is a fair opinion, requesting its removal, or of responding to the review with the other side of the story or with any improvements made after the review. However, identifying the reviewer can sometimes be difficult, and, of course, the reviewer may refuse to amend or remove the review, or even to respond to requests to do so.

If the reviews carry defamatory imputations against a health practitioner, then the practitioner will have other avenues to obtain the removal or amendment of the review, such as defamation proceedings, and can more strongly leverage that to request the relevant reviewer to remove or alter the review, if they are able to be identified. Defamation is a complicated and potentially costly area of the law and should be carefully considered before taking any action. Other potential avenues include anti-discrimination proceedings or the tort of injurious falsehood (particularly for practices). Both of which carry their own issues but can again be leveraged (if appropriate) to obtain the desired result.

Another option is to request Google to remove the review, which can be a slow process, but effective provided the request complies with Google's policy – click [here](#) for more details. Requesting Google to remove the review is more likely to be successful where the review is vulgar or offensive.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, negative Google reviews can be difficult for practitioners to deal with, can adversely impact their practice and there is no easy fix to the problem. Hopefully, the above provides some guidance, but, obviously, the answer is dependent on the facts of the particular issue. If practitioners have any issues with Google reviews most of the medical defence organisations have resources available to members to assist them with resolving the issue.

If you have any queries or would like further information regarding this article, please contact:

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