



Responding to Online Reviews and HIPAA

Online reviews have become a cornerstone of consumer decision-making. Healthcare is no exception. For chiropractors, these reviews can make or break their reputations. Positive reviews attract new patients, while negative ones can deter potential patients if not appropriately handled. However, responding to online reviews in healthcare comes with a unique challenge: compliance with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Why Responding Matters

Engaging with patient reviews shows that your practice values feedback, cares about patient experiences, and is committed to improvement. It's also an opportunity to showcase professionalism and attract new patients. However, even acknowledging someone as a patient without their explicit consent in healthcare can violate HIPAA. (Bass, Berry & Sims, 2024)

The Risks of Mishandling Reviews

HIPAA protects patient information, known as Protected Health Information (PHI), which includes medical details and the fact that someone is your patient. Disclosing PHI in response to an online review, even unintentionally, can lead to severe consequences, such as: (AMA)

- Penalties ranging from \$100 to \$1.5 million for breaches.
- Office for Civil Rights (OCR) investigations lead to costly corrective actions.
- Damage to your practice's reputation and patient trust.

Compliant Ways to Respond to Reviews

While the risks are real, chiropractors may still engage with reviews safely and effectively. Here's how: (Borchik)

1. **Avoid Confirming Patient Status**

- Never explicitly confirm or deny that the reviewer is a patient. Instead, use neutral language such as, "We appreciate your feedback and strive to provide excellent care to everyone who visits our clinic."

2. **Stay General**

- Discuss your practice's policies or values without referencing specific visits or treatments. For example, "We aim to ensure a positive experience for all visitors and welcome opportunities to improve our services."

3. **Train Your Team**

- Ensure your social media manager or any team member handling online interactions is trained on HIPAA compliance. Regular refreshers can help maintain awareness of privacy regulations.

4. **Use Pre-Approved Responses**

- Work with legal counsel to develop a library of compliant, pre-approved responses tailored to different types of reviews.

5. **Leverage AI Tools Carefully**

- Some AI tools can assist with responding to reviews, but they must be vetted to ensure they do not access or inadvertently disclose PHI.

6. **Encourage Direct Contact**

- Redirect discussions about specific issues offline. For example: "We'd like to learn more about your concerns. Please contact our office directly at [phone/email] so we can address them appropriately."

A HIPAA-compliant review strategy isn't just a best practice—it's a vital component of patient engagement and reputation management. Following these guidelines can protect your practice while reaping the benefits of an active online presence.

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Dr. Foxworth is deeply committed to advancing the chiropractic profession, which is evident through his leadership roles. He is an at-large board member of the Chiropractic Future Strategic Plan and holds an executive board position with the Foundation for Chiropractic Progress.