



Guest blog – “ Dealing with online patient comments

Our GP Support team’s Jan Swannell shares how she managed online complaints during her time as a practice manager in North London. After 15 years as a practice manager I joined Londonwide LMCs’s GP Support team last August as an assistant manager. In my time as practice manager I have, like most of you, seen many changes in general practice, not the least the advent and development of the dreaded CQC inspection.

Like it or loath it (or should that be loath it or loath it even more?) it’s here to stay, so we need to ensure that our day-to-day working practices embrace the principles of CQC’s regulations, which to be honest in many cases they do. But when focusing on the bigger picture it’s easy to forget, or not get around to reviewing the smaller things they will also look at. One of these is acknowledging and responding to online comments made on NHS Choices (or via your own website), which of course, falls into the area of ‘Are services responsive to people’s needs?’.

You will probably recognise the scenario, it’s a day when things just haven’t gone to plan;

A doctor has called in sick, you can’t get locum cover so clinics must be cancelled; then you’re told that two receptionists also have the flu so won’t be in, which makes afternoon cover a nightmare and the rest of the week is looking dire. On top of this the caffeine from your first coffee hasn’t kicked in yet when ‘ping’ you get an alert to a comment just posted on NHS Choices. Your heart sinks (after all you rarely get ‘pings’ when things are going well) and sure enough when you open it there’s a comment from an unhappy and anonymous patient.

Complaints hurt, especially when you know the whole team is going the extra mile, and on a day like this my first instinct would be to close it and put it in the ‘too difficult to deal with now’ pile; but is that really the best course of action? CQC inspectors want to see how we respond to patients, and that increasingly includes them doing a quick flick through the comments on NHS Choices, noting a practice’s responses to them, and looking for any actions taken.

So, always try to respond quickly to online comments. If it’s nice, you can just thank the sender for their kind words and ensure staff/doctors also get to see it. If it’s negative, then use the same time frame and processes that you would for any other written complaint, but don’t ignore it or push it to one side. No matter what you’d like to say, always ensure that your reply is professional and factual rather than defensive or aggressive.

Even if the complainant is anonymous, there’s still no reason why you can’t ask them to contact you direct so their views can be discussed. They may not respond, but at least you’ve tried. This action is recognised as a powerful reputational management tactic and can be a useful device against an unfair comment. It shows that you are listening and prepared to be objective.

Sometimes you’ll receive a comment that you think is defamatory; here you have two choices:

If a name is included, then you can respond directly to the person, requesting that they amend or remove their comment. If they won’t, then follow the process for anonymous comments, below.

If it’s anonymous then immediately contact the website administrator asking for it to be removed but remember that you’re going to have to include reasons why you feel the comment is defamatory. Once you’ve raised the complaint, then the site administrator should remove the comment quite quickly if it doesn’t have any contact details, but this will take longer if the administrator is able to contact the writer.

So, time for another coffee? Well before you go and put the kettle on don’t forget to add the complaint details to your audit information. A regular review of this information will help you see if there are any patterns and/or areas that you could make changes/improvements to, e.g. more complaints about Tuesday clinics when there are less doctors working could result in a change of working patterns or appointment types.

The audit can also help you devise template replies to reoccurring complaint areas, like lack of appointments, waiting times etc., which can then be used as responses by other staff members, so freeing up some of your time.

Finally, you may find some of the following guidance from NHS Choices helpful:

Comments policy

Managing patient feedback

Best practice – responding to patient feedback