



Analytics and Data Science Institute

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Data Science Research Series

How Valid Are Online Patient Reviews?: A Comparison of Physician Peer Review and Online Patient Ratings



BACKGROUND

Over 84% of all US adults use online ratings sites to inform their product or service purchase decisions. The same is true for health care – patients increasingly access online ratings sites to inform their healthcare decisions, with online ratings emerging as the most influential factor for choosing a physician – 53% of physicians and 39% of patients reported visiting a health care rating website at least once. In this study we sought to determine the validity of online patient ratings through comparison with physician peer review – defined in this study through Castle Connolly Medical.

APPROACH

Through Healthgrades.com, Vitals.com and RateMD.com, we extracted 223,715 reviews of 41,104 physicians from 10 of the largest cities in the United States, including 1,142 physicians listed as “America’s Top Doctors” from Castle Connolly Medical –a private consumer research firm that distinguishes top providers both nationally and regionally through a peer nomination process that involves over 50,000 providers and hospital and healthcare executives. Differences in mean online patient ratings were tested for physicians who were listed as a “Top Doctor” and those who were not.

RESULTS

Differences in online patient ratings between physicians listed or not listed as “Top Doctors” varied greatly by specialization. For four medical specializations – Family Medicine, Allergists, Internal Medicine and Pediatrics – saw patient ratings that “agreed” with Physician Peer Review. Specifically, patient ratings of physicians listed as a “Top Doctor” were statistically higher for these specializations versus patient ratings of physicians not listed as a “Top Doctor”. Other medical specializations, including Caridologists, Endocrinologists, Gastroenterologists, Oncologists, Neurologists, Ophthalmologists, and Urologists, did not see differences in patient ratings between those physicians listed as a “Top Doctor” or not.

CONCLUSIONS

A deceptive review or set of reviews related to a hotel visit is an inconvenience, but decisions made on deceptive or poorly informed patient reviews related to a health care provider could have dire consequences for an individual using these reviews to inform their health care related decisions. The presence of online ratings sites will likely continue to grow and expand across all segments of the economy. The results of this large-scale study indicate that while patient ratings are consistent with physician peer review rating for specialties like Allergists and Pediatricians, patient reviews were not consistent with medical peer review for specializations characterized by less patient contact like Cardiology. This result may indicate that patients are not sufficiently knowledgeable to provide informed physician ratings for some medical specializations, leading other information-seekers to potentially less qualified providers.

CITATION FOR FULL ARTICLE

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