

FASHIONS FAME BEAUTY GOOD



1/17/10 at 8:21 PM

Angry Plastic-Surgery Patients Vent Online; Doctors on Damage Control

BY BETH LANDMAN

Cosmetic surgeons are quite familiar with difficult patients and malpractice cases; a few years back, a man who had undergone a face-lift was so unhappy with the results that he took to picketing outside the office of his surgeon, Dr. Michel Verga, while wearing a sandwich board with before-and-after pictures. But this act of public vengeance is ephemeral in comparison to the career-damaging vents posted online by angry patients. While much of the information is crucial in protecting prospective patients from dangerous professionals and/or treatments, the uptick in online reviews has doctors increasingly desperate for a way to protect their reputations.

A slew of sites such as [Vitals](#), [HealthBoards](#), and [Make Me Heal](#) have become online hubs for patients to share [questions, information, and personal experiences](#). As more and more prospective patients turn to the wisdom of the masses for [often-valuable insight](#), online reviewers wield considerable power as critics. And it's making doctors nervous. "Someone just came in

and said, 'I am scheduling with you despite what it said on the web,'" sighed Dr. John Sherman, whose Upper East Side practice specializes in facial rejuvenation and body contouring. "I panicked. You can have a hundred thrilled patients and one [who's] dissatisfied, and that one person can destroy your career."

Dr. Sydney Coleman, a Manhattan plastic surgeon known for fat-transfer techniques and the subject of many angry reviews, knows this well. He's spent over \$100,000 in order to take down the now-defunct SydneyColeman.net, a site created by a former patient who, according to Coleman, spewed false accusations. "[The patient] had bad surgery on his lower lids from another doctor and wanted me to correct it with fat," recalls Coleman. "Then he was unhappy with [my work] and wanted me to pay his way from Chicago — where he lived — and put him up in a hotel so he could come in for a follow-up. When I refused, he went off the deep end. [The site] definitely impacted my business, and in retrospect I wish I had just paid for his trip."

While the backstory is often crucial to understanding a customer's dissatisfaction, it's hard for a doctor to share this sort of information — particularly when the criticism is coming from a patient's personal website. "I had a good reputation before all this started," sighs Dr. John Gunter, a top Dallas-based plastic surgeon and the subject of a gruesome website called [Nose Job Gone Bad](#). "The person who started that website never filed a malpractice suit because he knew it wasn't malpractice; it was a complication." Not that it matters — the angry patient's jarring photos and [video](#) drown out any chance of hearing the other side of the story.

Doctors, however, have begun to fight back. "I've started asking patients to sign a waiver before I treat them, saying they will not use my name on the Internet," says Dr. Sherman. A company called Medical Justice draws up this type of contract for doctors

to give patients, because while the sites are under no legal obligation to remove anything inaccurate posted by a third party, they can be forced to take down postings that violate a doctor-patient contract. Dr. Sherman's patient review is [generally positive](#), though it's hard to say whether that's because of the waivers.

The American Medical Association, meanwhile, has just signed a contract with the company Reputation Defender, which offered its services at a discount. "Doctors are the fastest growing segment of our business," says founder Michael Fertik. "They've spent a lot of time training, and their personal names are tied in to their professional success. It takes two minutes to give someone a giant scar on his reputation — it's the way the Internet is set up."

It takes time and patience for a patient to draw a well-informed conclusion based on information posted online — but warnings about a genuinely dangerous doctor are invaluable. For doctors, however, there aren't a lot of upsides. "If you start checking these sites you will have many sleepless nights," says Dr. Sherman. "But any physician who thinks he can ignore them had better think again."

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