

More patients are checking doctor-rating websites, study finds

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But just how trustworthy these reviews are isn't clear.

(HealthDay)—More Americans are choosing their doctor the same way they settle on a car or TV: with the help of online ratings, a new study suggests.

Websites such as Healthgrades.com and RateMDs.com offer people a way to look up local doctors and see patient reviews. And based on the new findings, many patients are putting that information to use.

In a survey of more than 2,100 Americans, researchers found that two-thirds knew that doctor-rating sites exist. And of those surveyed, one-quarter had used the sites in the past year.

Those rates are higher than what's been seen in past studies, said lead researcher Dr. David Hanauer, of the University of Michigan Medical School in Ann Arbor.

"So it looks like there has been increased use over time," Hanauer said.

More important, he added, people who visit the sites use the information to make decisions. In this survey, 35 percent of site users picked a doctor because of a good rating, while 37 percent avoided a doctor with a poor rating, the investigators found.

But whether that's a good thing isn't clear, Hanauer's team noted in the Feb. 19 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

"We don't really know how trustworthy the ratings on these sites are," Hanauer said.

Plus, sites differ in how they operate. On a general site such as Yelp.com, where you can rate anything from restaurants to doctors, users award "stars" and leave comments. The situation is different on Healthgrades, which says it gets more than 250 million visits a year.

There, users fill out a standard patient-satisfaction survey, which asks about areas such as the doctor's communication skills, the friendliness of the office staff, and whether it's easy to get an urgent appointment.

Beyond that, Healthgrades pulls together different pieces of objective information, said Evan Marks, the company's executive vice-president for informatics and strategy.

That includes information on a doctor's board certifications, types of procedures offered, and which insurance plans the office accepts. It also lists a doctor's hospital affiliations, and offers information on how well those hospitals perform—which is collected from government data.

"It's a very comprehensive compendium of information," Marks said. However, he added, "I don't think anyone should base a decision on

patient ratings alone."

One problem is that many doctors might have only a few patients who completed surveys, which could skew their ratings. One patient who has a bad experience could send a doctor's rating into the basement, for example.

Still, Hanauer said, there are few ways for people to get more subjective information about doctors, other than asking family and friends.

"So these sites do seem to be filling a void," Hanauer explained.

Aside from whether the current trend is good or bad, the reality is that "the next generation of health care consumers is going to be using online resources," said Ritu Agarwal, who directs the Center for Health Information and Decision Systems at the University of Maryland in College Park.

Agarwal, who studies information technology and health care, said it's "encouraging" that most people in the current survey were aware that doctor-rating sites exist. She agreed that patient ratings are only one piece of information to consider when choosing a doctor—but it can also be a useful piece.

"When I'm looking for a new dentist, I go online," Agarwal said.

Her colleague, Guodong Gao, said there are "multiple dimensions" to the concept of quality health care. "Online ratings provide one important dimension, which is the patient experience," he said.

Doctors aren't always thrilled by the thought of patient ratings, Hanauer noted. But they might not have a lot to worry about, at least so far. In their research, Agarwal and Gao have found that most online reviews are

positive—with no evidence that "disgruntled patients" dominate.

So at this point, Gao said, it seems that people are using the sites more as a way to recommend a doctor than to critique one.

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