

## I NET A DOCTOR! What you should know about choosing a physician online

When Adrienne Proeller of Atlanta was looking for a new primary care physician, she first tried the usual route of asking friends and acquaintances for referrals. But she ran into several roadblocks, including doctors who didn't take her insurance and others who did but weren't accepting new patients.

Then Proeller plugged her requirements into the search engine of her insurance company and that of a local hospital. She didn't bother looking at user ratings, which she considered too subjective, and instead considered each doctor's age, education and board certification, and whether they had done research on the issues that were pertinent to her own health. "I felt the information online was trustworthy," said Proeller, who is very pleased with her new doctor.

More and more patients are turning to the Internet to find a physician. "It's about putting power in the patients' hands so they can make informed decisions about their health care," said Peter Carpenter, manager of DocFind, Aetna's physician search engine. The site averages 15 million to 16 million visits each year, including members looking for physicians and non-members comparing insurance plans. While DocFind offers a comprehensive look at each doctor, including hospital affiliations and languages spoken, it doesn't offer a ratings system yet. "I think there's a need for that," said Carpenter. "We're trying to determine the right approach, and still be sensitive to physicians and their practices."



While some doctors insist that patients sign privacy waivers to prevent them from commenting about their experiences on sites like RateMDs, Health-Grades, DoctorScorecard and Angie's List, others have found online ratings systems to be an effective marketing tool. When Dr. Todd McNiff was building up his New York City-based practice in 2009, he noticed that he got a couple of good reviews on Yelp, a business rating site. Figuring this might be a good way to generate patient leads, McNiff sent out an email to several of his patients, asking them to write a Yelp review. Although he's never solicited a review since, McNiff currently is one of the top-rated doctors on the site for his location. McNiff estimates that 90 percent of his patients are under the age of 40, and attributes his robust practice to the fact that his patients are both Web-savvy and engaged in their health.

Yelp is where Dan Nainan, a 30-year-old New Yorker, discovered McNiff. "I put in the word 'doctor' and my zip code, then I ranked the businesses by best to worst rating," explained Nainan. "The ratings are important, but you have to take them with a grain of salt. If there's a bad rating, you have to look at who the rater is and, if they've only done one rating total, it's probably from a competitor. But when you see people who are real nerds about this and they have 150 reviews out there, you can take what they've written as more trustful. Being online is a great thing. If I had a broken bone, I'd just put in 'orthopedist' and my zip code again."

When Brendan Foley of Bethesda, Md., was suffering from an allergy-induced sinus infection, he typed "allergist" and his location into Google. "I stumbled onto ZocDoc," said Foley. "With one click of the mouse, I booked an appointment for the following Monday. ZocDoc later sent me reminder text messages and a meeting invitation that synced

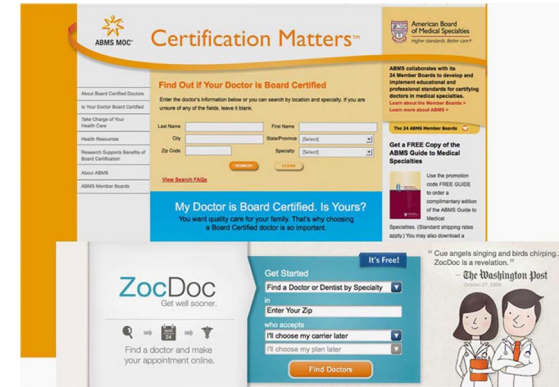
with my Outlook calendar. Problem solved!" Foley went back to the ZocDoc site and rated his allergist as five out of five stars.

ZocDoc was co-founded in 2007 by Cyrus Massoumi, a former strategy adviser at management consulting firm McKinsey, after he ruptured an eardrum and was unable to find a specialist on short notice. "It took me four days to get an appointment and four weeks to clear it up," said Massoumi. "I thought, 'Why can't I find a doctor like I book my flights or reservations online?'"

ZocDoc now serves 16 cities across America, and is used by over 1 million people per month. Doctors pay a monthly subscription fee to join, and provide the usual information regarding insurance plans accepted, education and hospital affiliations. But unlike other sites, the user can make an appointment directly through the ZocDoc site. Although physicians can choose to opt out of being rated by ZocDoc patients, most do not, and Massoumi stressed that what makes ZocDoc stand apart from other sites is the fact that every review comes from a verified patient.

Physicians can track how many patients came from the ZocDoc site and when they were seen, as well as other pertinent information. "I was very skeptical," admitted Dr. Ryan Simovitch, president of the Palm Beach Orthopaedic Institute in Florida. "I thought it was another search engine that takes you nowhere. But it's something that's been very beneficial to me personally."

Online search tools are not only an invaluable resource for prospective patients, they seem to be revolutionizing the doctor/patient relationship. When McNiff received a negative review on Yelp, he was able to reach out to the patient and correct what had been a misunderstanding. "And keep in mind that if someone



has great reviews but you go to the office and get a bad vibe, trust your instincts," advised McNiff. "You should always feel like you're being treated like a customer."

Searching for help

Some popular sites to scan and rate medical professionals

### HEALTHGRADES

healthgrades.com  
Search for doctors, dentists and hospitals according to location. Physician data are updated quarterly and include info on specialties, procedures performed, state licensing, medical and undergraduate education, accepted insurance, patient surveys and whether the physician is taking on new patients.

### ZOCDOC

zocdoc.com  
Free service that lets patients find a doctor and book an appointment online. Users search by specialty, ZIP code and insurance carrier, and can view ratings based on overall recommendation, bedside manner and waiting time. Other info includes a professional statement, languages spoken, awards and education.

### RATEMDS

ratemds.com  
A website where patients can rate their doctors on their staff, punctuality, helpfulness and knowledge, without having to create an account or log in. The site tries to keep an eye out for multiple ratings that come from one computer, or unusual rating activity for a particular doctor, but advises users to take the ratings with "a grain of salt." Includes a "Wall of Shame," which lists doctors who require patients to sign gag contracts that prevent them from posting reviews online.

### YELP

yelp.com  
Provides basic doctor information, including address, website and phone number, but the reviews tend to be very detailed. Users have to create an account in order to post a review, and the number of comments makes it a useful site to get a sense of things like a doctor's bedside manner or the office staff's courteousness.

### AMERICAN BOARD OF MEDICAL SPECIALTIES

certificationmatters.org  
A list of doctors who are board-certified, meaning they have passed exams in their specialties beyond the standard medical licensing and kept up with the latest medical advances.