From the Editor's Desk

e RATING DOCTORS

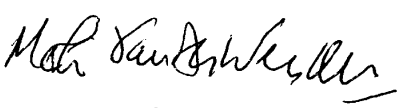
The internet has changed communication irrevocably. Its universality, ease of access, somewhat seductive spontaneity, and anonymity have all conspired to create the electronic equivalent of water-cooler gossip.

But this miracle of modern communication may also prove to be invasive, as exemplified by websites allowing people to rate teachers (eg, rate myteachers.com) and doctors. In the United States, online doctor-rating sites, such as RateMDs, Vimo and Revolution Health, offer patients the opportunity to rate doctors on their interpersonal skills, helpfulness, knowledge base and punctuality. This rating game has taken off like wildfire, with hundreds of reviews logged daily.*

Supporters of such sites regard this facility as integral to the consumer movement, wherein patients exercise their rights to express their opinions about services they pay for. Ratings may be accompanied by yellow smiley faces beside the names of doctors receiving rave reviews because of their compassionate care, appropriate communication skills and their ability to engender trust. At the other extreme are those whose names are accompanied by angry blue faces, signifying a litany of failings such as rude behaviour bordering on arrogance, failure to give patients space, and unreliability or misdiagnosis.

Critics of these sites are frequently dismayed by defamatory remarks, mostly anonymous, to which there is no right of reply and whose authenticity cannot be verified. Is the person posting the review really a patient, and not someone with a grudge against a doctor or, heaven forbid, a professional competitor?

As we seem unable to resist most things made in America, this online doctor-rating movement will undoubtedly grow in Australia. We don't yet know whether these sites will enhance the quality and safety of practice, but, in many ways, such chaotic and unregulated activity does bring to mind the notorious witch trials of Salem.



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*Jain S. Googling ourselves — what physicians can learn from online rating sites. *N Engl J Med* 2010; 362: 6-7.

LETTERS

BOOK REVIEW