

FEATURE



MEDICINE AND THE MEDIA

TripAdvisor for fertility clinics

A user generated website that scores clinics looks likely but will it be of any help to people seeking treatment, asks **Sally Howard**

Sally Howard *journalist, London*

TripAdvisor is a website that hosts mostly user generated reviews of hotels and so on of interest to tourists. Should patients seeking fertility treatment get something similar, based on others' reviews, to help them choose a clinic?

A public debate convened by the Progress Educational Trust at London's Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in April considered this divisive issue. Lucy Richardson, a senior clinical embryologist and an audience member, voiced the concerns of many in recounting her experience of booking a weekend break to Italy with her TripAdvisor conversant mother: "If it's not a five [star rating] for everything from location to sleep quality and cleanliness, she won't consider it. But what does a star rating tell you?"

"What could such a crude measure, for example, tell you about the complex experience of undergoing fertility treatment?"

User generated review websites are one of the decade's dotcom success stories. They range from review and ratings sites (such as TripAdvisor), where users rate people or products, to review aggregators, which collect reviews from other sites and independently assign ratings based on these reviews (such as Rotten Tomatoes and FindTheBest.com).

The user review model has already made inroads into UK healthcare. Sites that publish user reviews of private medical travel and cosmetic surgery (such as harleystreetguide.com and treatmentabroad.com) proliferate. And in 2007 NHS Choices (nhs.uk) broke new ground for a government website by introducing a facility for patients to comment on hospital services. To cover the full range of services, today NHS Choices publishes 400 000 ratings and moderated free text reviews, with 120 000 unique users reading them each week, a spokesperson told *The BMJ*.

Not if but when?

For Juliet Tizzard, interim director of strategy at the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), the public body behind the debated proposal, it's not a question of whether a similar review service should be offered for the fertility sector—but when.

"When, in 2005 the HFEA began listing clinic outcome statistics [as successful pregnancies per embryo transfer], we were ahead of the curve," she told *The BMJ*. "Today there's so much patient feedback in the system it's seen as a given."

Adam Balen is a consultant at one of the largest of these clinics, the Leeds Centre for Productive Medicine, which gets 60% of its funding from the NHS. He told *The BMJ* that he is concerned about the implications for clinicians. "NHS funded clinics often lack the glossy front-of-house of the private clinics," Balen said. "There's little doubt that this will skew any rating towards private clinics."

Other fertility professionals question whether it's appropriate for the HFEA, the industry regulator, to back such a scheme.

"The HFEA is a robust source in a sea of misinformation," Susan Seenan, chief executive of the charity Infertility Network UK, told *The BMJ*. "If unmoderated user reviews are published on the HFEA's site, the risk is that patients will interpret them as having HFEA's seal of approval." And moderation is likely to be prohibitively expensive.

The question of review bias is also moot. Users motivated to leave reviews are disproportionately statistically "extreme"—one or five star voters. Then there's the contentious issue of faked reviews. In 2010, TripAdvisor faced a class action from 700 hospitality providers after lawyers alleged that up to 30% of its unmoderated reviews had been faked by marketers and "reputation management" professionals¹; lawsuits continue to dog the site.

Legal risks

Antonia Foster, a media litigation specialist, was a panellist at the 29 April debate alongside Tizzard, Seenan, and Yacoub Khalaf, medical director of the assisted conception unit at London's Guy's Hospital. She warned of the legal risks of pursuing the TripAdvisor model.

"There are risks to posters, if named, of being sued for defamation," she said. "These risks extend to the HFEA if the appropriate legal protections are not in place. From the clinic side, there are profound financial and reputational considerations

should bad user reviews, as they tend to, proliferate unchecked on the web.”

Potential legal tripwires are the reason the HFEA, Tizzard admits, is unlikely to offer free text user reviews as in the TripAdvisor and NHS Choices model: “Frankly, we can’t afford the moderation bill,” she explained.

Instead the HFEA is likely to adopt a one to five star rating, with five tailored questions to include the extent to which the patient felt well supported in the treatment process and whether treatment costs were transparent. Tizzard hopes to pervert marketers’ attempts to falsify clinic ratings by tracking reviewers’ IP (internet protocol) addresses and contacting clinics that register an unlikely spike in review activity.

But can a simple star rating really help illuminate, as one interlocutor put it, the “complex experience of undergoing fertility treatment?”

For Khalaf focusing on the flaws in the process of gathering and representing statistics misses the point. “For clinicians, feedback is the breakfast of champions,” he told an animated room. “We should embrace any new data that help us to improve patient experience.”

Competing interests: I have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and have no relevant interests to declare.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

- 1 Morris S. TripAdvisor could face legal action over reviews. *Guardian* 2010 Sep 24. www.theguardian.com/travel/2010/sep/24/tripadvisor-travelwebsites.
- 2 HFEA. Fertility treatment in 2011. www.hfea.gov.uk/docs/HFEA_Fertility_Trends_and_Figures_2011_-_Annual_Register_Report.pdf.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;350:h2599

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2015

Fact box: fertility treatment in the UK²

- Each year about 50 000 women receive fertility treatment in the UK
- About 80% receive in vitro fertilisation (IVF) or intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) treatment; about 20% receive donor insemination
- Four in 10 IVF and ICSI treatment cycles are funded by the NHS; the rest are funded privately
- In 2014 the UK had 93 clinics offering IVF treatment and 60 clinics offering ICSI, according to HFEA figures