

Cyberspace Chat

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The Internet Discussion Forum (IDF)

Many websites exist on the internet dedicated to a broad range of informative, useful, and educational topics concerning hair and hair transplant surgery. They are filled with photos, videos, and written information about any hair related topic you can imagine, including surgery. There are websites without any apparent sponsors or advertising, others supported by extensive on-line stores (one that offers “discreet shipping” and finasteride “from a trusted source”), some with .org addresses, those from societies like the ISHRS, and many others. The websites discussed in this article are those sponsored or supported by fees paid by physicians. In return, the physicians are “recommended” by the websites and the physicians receive direct inquiries from prospective patients. The physicians’ goal in advertising on these websites is to turn these leads into surgeries.

An integral component of these websites is the Internet Discussion Forum (IDF). IDFs are ongoing, online email discussions within a website where information is shared. Posts are organized into separate topics or “threads” and consist of statements or questions made by the lay general public and those involved in the hair restoration industry including the sponsoring physicians. Most IDFs require that all posters join (at no cost) by providing an active email address. The lay public asks questions, makes comments, or gives advice/opinions concerning their experiences—often their transplant experiences—and a review of their surgical results and physician. The physicians answer questions, make statements, and provide before and after patient photos and videos. The IDF and website are managed by an administrator/owner who makes the rules to be followed by all posters. The administrator reserves the right to remove, edit, move, or close any post or thread, and to remove any poster or physician. The recommended physicians generally pay or “contribute” a monthly fee to the website owner to “sponsor” the website and discussion forum within this website. These physicians, and only these physicians, are then “recommended” by the website.

Within the ISHRS website (ishrs.org) there resides a discussion forum. The ISHRS has created this forum “as a place to ask questions, educate, and inform, not to market or promote your products or services” in an “open environment where consumers, physicians, and anyone interested can discuss the topics associated with hair loss, hair restoration, and hair restoration surgery.” All are welcome and no sponsorship fees are required.

The origins of this type of website can be traced to about 15 years ago during the burgeoning popularity of the internet and its ability to widely disseminate information. The search for good results from hair transplant surgery then became not just local but regional, national, and even international. Commercial chains consisting of multiple hair transplant clinics began to spend large sums to advertise on national television and the internet, competing with smaller, local hair transplant practices. Since paying a percentage of the surgical fee and/or paying for referrals would violate fee-splitting statutes, these website owners offered a way for an individual practitioner to join a small, select group of physicians

to compete by pooling advertising dollars to support their websites. Ostensibly, these selected physicians offered the best results obtainable. The website owners developed their own criteria by which to determine quality results and select the physicians. Quite a few physicians were refused admission to the groups selected.

A profit was there to be made for the internet-savvy website owners who could leverage negative or positive patient experiences and information about hair and hair transplants to position their website to attract internet traffic. It developed into a system whereby the administrators were able to generate leads for physicians who would pay significant fees to them to be listed on their websites as “recommended physicians.”

The website owners are now well versed in information technology specifically that which allows them to position their websites high on internet search engines to promote and direct traffic to their main websites. Some create multiple and sometimes, redundant, websites funneling potential patients into their main site. Other tactics include creating what appears to be a non-profit organization’s website that uses the same list of fee paying physicians “recommended” on a linked site. The goal appears to be to conceal the physician selection process and the fact that physicians are buying advertising to be “recommended” by these sites. It would appear rather the physicians are recommended only because they provide excellent results from hair restoration surgery. One website claims its doctors are the best in the world without revealing their selection criteria. Over the years, these small, select, exclusive groups of “recommended” physicians have greatly expanded.

There have been controversies surrounding these websites and IDFs since their inception. A review of the two of the more popular such websites reveals that 90% of the advertising physicians are ISHRS member physicians. To address controversies, questions were recently posed to a group of ISHRS member physicians concerning the IDFs. These included:

1. Do you think the forums are really necessary or is their time past? Are they, as one said, a necessary evil?
2. Do you think their effects are diluted due to too many doctors on each site?
3. Are you able to track inquires and how many leads convert to consultations or surgeries?
4. Do you think they are worth the cost?
5. Do they create false exclusionary, insular social networks?
6. Any other opinions are welcome.

Below are the responses to the above questions:

1. **Do you think the forums are really necessary or is their time past? Are they, as one said, a necessary evil?**

“If we’re good, I believe there is no need, however, I have to admit that there is more traffic becoming the member.”

"I think it's a very nice and easy way to be well known. Personally, I just post one case or twice a month. I never do any other comments and don't have any patient working for my promotion. I just try to present nice and impressive cases. I'm very surprised how so many people are coming from all over just because they read discussions and opinions on forums...I feel patients are more educated than before. It's not important to be the first one on internet, it's better to have nice and authentic real reviews."

"I think they are potentially helpful for patients to have genuine feel for what's available. However, I fear they have become just an extension of one's marketing where many contributors are promoters for doctors. With the growing importance of social media, maybe indeed the forums are losing their value. At the moment, I think they are still a 'necessary evil' unless everyone agrees on a mass exodus!"

"Necessary, no, helpful, yes."

"I do think it is a necessary evil."

"If there was full disclosure that doctors who advertised on the sites were paying thousands of dollars annually for the privilege, then it would be more truthful. False conversations started by a paid member of staff to another in order to besmirch a non-paying doctor destroys the site's credibility. The fact that honest posts from a non-paying doctor's happy patient can be hidden behind a screen so that the public can't see it, but the webmaster can't be successfully sued because he has not technically removed the posts from the site, stinks. The fact that a 'gun' is held to your head—"pay XXX US \$ per annum or I will bad mouth you"—is plain extortion and should be able to be convicted under the RICO Act. I am speaking from actual experience."

"My own experience should be classified as a necessary evil."

"I don't know if 'necessary' is the word I would use to describe their role at this time, but they fill a vacuum that is there and I think they are here to stay in some combination or another. On the one hand, for the doctors who are featured on them, it is actually a cheaper way to advertise than to be in a dozen yellow pages and several newspapers (which are obsolete just about now anyway). But there is a risk and danger with them. A single patient could make it his life goal to ruin your reputation over some silly dispute or unfulfilled expectation and your practice turns to 'toast' overnight."

"I think they are essentially unethical. They say to the public that their surgeons are the best ones, among all existing surgeons. It is false. What they should say is: we have the best surgeons, among all the surgeons who contact us and pay us, as a condition."

"I just think that we as a class don't need them."

2. Do you think their effects are diluted due to too many doctors on each site?

"I do."

"Yes, probably there is the risk. There is also some 'fashion' effect with a particular attraction for some 'new' doctor on the field. But this is life. The competitors give you the obligation to produce every time the very best work..."

"Over time...XXX...has added so many doctors that the benefit to each doctor has been diluted."

"Yes, too many recommended doctors and some especially on '...XXX...' without clear justification or basis. I think they are clearly maximizing their income rather than mainly serving the patients. Some will argue that has been the case since the beginning, but I think the original idea had principle."

"That depends on the market. However, as a general rule, markets with multiple 'recommended' surgeons are much larger than those with a single surgeon, so I think it all averages out."

"Absolutely yes, my google metrics show that I have over the past two years 50% less traffic and less emails from ...XXX... not on other sites and I am glad of that because once you are on the site it is hard to pull out. The monthly cost is still paid for by cases but the ROI (return on investment) is much less."

"From a purely selfish standpoint, the answer is yes, I think any doctor who practices good hair transplantation has the same right as I do to be on them. What I object to in the way of 'diluting effect' is the fact that a lot of the comments and questions concern doctors and patients several continents away from the U.S. so that a potential patient for me has to wade through all of that to find something about doctors in this country where I am. Again, it's somewhat of a selfish viewpoint, but I have to confess it exists."

"The original aim I believe was to genuinely promote the best doctors. Today the goal is to promote anyone who will pay. The bottom line has changed and maybe by having too many doctors promoted, the public will see through the ruse and they will lose credibility."

3. Are you able to track inquiries and how many leads convert to consultations or surgeries?

"I haven't kept track but the rough estimate is 60% of the inquiries came for consultation and 70% of those signed in for surgery."

"Yes we do track enquiries and the forums, especially... XXX..., by a long shot bring in a lot of quality patients who convert if I deem them suitable."

"Yes, with ...XXX..., very strong return"

"Yes, from ...XXX..., no for ...XXX.... I haven't looked at the numbers for a while, but ...XXX... leads are certainly very fruitful."

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"I don't do it through the computer, but every consultation patient is asked how they learned about our practice, and I find out how well our memberships in hair sites are doing toward helping bring in patients. Many people don't recall exactly where they learned about you. They often will simply say they did some 'research' and learned of you. I am pretty sure that in most instances 'research' means they peeked in on a few of these hair sites."

"We do not get as many inquiries as when we were among the original dozen. I have never been able to directly identify consultations or contacts that arise out of ...XXX...."

4. Do you think they are worth the cost?

"They are worth the cost but not the hassle from the patient."

"I think they are all good value except ...XXX..., if I use the data from consultations."

"Yes for ...XXX..., no for the other one (I left a few years ago)."

"Yes, the ROI (return on investment) is very high, and allows me to not worry so much about massaging my own web site SEO (search engine optimization)."

"No, and I had asked about a joint letter to ...XXX..., to ask for a reduction in individual fees in the face of their diluting our panel of docs monthly and simultaneously collecting more fees for themselves. The ...XXX..., with their history of indefatigable legal fight when needed has scared many of our group and there is a mafia-like fear not to question them."

"The internet forums, if truthful, are worth it, but the public have to sieve the truth from the fraudsters."

"Overall, I would have to say yes, although I sometimes wonder about certain sites as to their value. The question reminds me of J.C. Penny's quote, when asked about the value of his advertising. He said: 'Half of my advertising is a complete waste of money. The problem is I don't know which half it is.'"

5. Do they (IDFS) create false exclusionary, insular social networks?

"I believe they do."

"Not anymore because, like I said, there are a lot of recommended doctors. If you are not recommended, however, or worse you are actually derided on them then yes they will make you feel that they are insular."

"Yes, sometimes. A good example is ...XXX...M.D. You cannot write his name on any post, you can just use his initials."

"For the most part, the listed surgeons are very good. There is no other source more likely to present high-quality surgeons,

including the ISHRS and the ABHRS. Any site created and run by surgeons would not be considered trustworthy by a consumer."

"There is a fool born every minute and the fraudsters prey on them."

"My hope is that any doctor who is doing good work would have the opportunity to present himself and examples of his work and be able to be accepted with open arms on any of the sites."

Additional comments:

"All of this being said, we hear patients say over and over again that they came to us because we have such a great reputation on the internet. So I think being on the sites and posting many cases over the years has elevated our presence and stature."

"They are trying to get more doctors to become members, despite a few years in practice, to generate more revenue to survive in the competitive market. We have to be very careful since the patients from these are demanding and threatening to post in the network if things go wrong or they are not happy."

"We could create our proper forum with a severe list of quality criterion to be part of it...."

*"The poor suckers believe this s***."*

"They should say that the 'members' are excellent, but they should also say that only those who contact them and pay fees appear."

"Short of an initial vetting, there is no real ongoing credentialing on any of these sites. I think the only criteria for ongoing selection is that fees are being paid and no complaints arise."

"If you check out the ...XXX... website, you will see if you look at the recommended physicians' CVs that they end in about ...year XXXX.... This conveys a serious lack of interest and ongoing involvement by the host."

Commentary

One of the first websites was started by a very satisfied hair transplant patient who wanted to extol the virtues of his physician and inform potential patients about his positive experience. He knew how to build a website and use the internet, and then he began getting inquiries, not just locally, but from all over. Not all the patients could travel to the doctor's location so the website owner developed a model to refer these patients to closer physicians who were trusted colleagues of his physician. Originally, he proposed that the operating physician pay him (the website owner) a percentage of the surgical fee. When informed that this would constitute fee splitting and is prohibited, the owner instead charged a fixed monthly advertising fee from the physician in return for being recommended.

Another website offered individual surgeons nationwide exposure and the ability to compete with national chains of clinics by pooling advertising dollars. The website owner allowed a small number of physicians who provided excellent results to advertise on his website. These physicians were required to

submit before and after photos as well as have good reputations in general and especially on the internet.

I was an advertiser on a number of these websites in the past and was involved with their evolution in the early years. I haven't advertised on any of the sites for over 10 years. I do remember visiting these websites almost daily, prepared to defend my name and reputation against trolls (persons who sow discord on the Internet by starting arguments or upsetting people) or others who intended to impugn my reputation. At times, I posted comments and photos. Posters often took my words out of context and concentrated on aspects or details of the post that were not consequential. Although I did get quite a few leads and surgeries, I remember more, patients irreparably damaged by past surgeries looking for a miracle. I spent a lot of time communicating with people who were not candidates, lived too far away to make traveling to me financially feasible, and some who were downright crazy. I now spend much less on good, solid SEO (search engine optimization) for my website than I paid as a "recommended" member on these websites. I did avoid controversies for the most part and, on the positive side, these websites did help me build my reputation and stature in the hair website community. I stopped advertising when I found that I received less than five leads in a year from a popular website I was paying thousands yearly to.

Over the years, as these websites, the internet, and the hair restoration industry have proliferated, there have been positive and negative consequences and opinions. The questions were asked to get the opinions of a group of ISHRS members, the majority of whom are advertisers on one or more of these websites. I'll examine each question separately.

1. Do you think the forums are really necessary or is their time past? Are they, as one said, a necessary evil?

The responses were mixed. The positive comments include "there is more traffic," "very nice and easy way to be well known," and "potentially helpful for patients." Other responses were for the most part negative and supported the assertion that the websites are a necessary evil. Fifteen years ago, it was more difficult and more costly to be individually recognized on the internet. Now a physician's own website can be constructed, optimized, and positioned high on search engines, while being promoted on multiple social media outlets, all on a much smaller budget. Experienced, reputable physicians who rely on return patients and word-of-mouth advertising may not require the exposure, while a less-experienced and less-well-known surgeon who wants to advertise to a broader audience to establish his or her reputation may benefit greatly from these websites and forums.

The responses above do expose the serious concerns that have been voiced for some time. These include the lack of transparency and full disclosure of the fact that doctors are paying to be recommended, that false threads can be started on an IDF to purposely impugn one's reputation while positive threads concerning a non-paying doctor can be deleted, and that legal action has been taken by physicians against website owners and by website owners against physicians for slander and libel. There are posters with hidden agendas who are lurking with the intent to do damage. There are lay posters who answer posts for a doctor or doctors and are transparent about their paid position to do so. It can be a treacherous place to reside as one negative thread, legitimate or not, blown out of proportion can

significantly harm a physician's reputation. Each IDF seems to have its own gestalt, and with some experience, the reader can usually sort out fact from fiction and legitimate poster from troll or someone with an agenda.

2. Do you think their effects are diluted due to too many doctors on each site?

The responses indicate an almost unanimous, yes. To reiterate their history, the sites started out with a much smaller number of paying physicians and now include longer lists of doctors from around the world. Some have more than 50 recommended doctors. This certainly dilutes the benefit to each individual surgeon. There are concerns that doctors are added by website owners only to generate additional income for the owners and that their selection criteria has changed in some way to allow more doctors to advertise.

3. Are you able to track inquires and how many leads convert to consultations or surgeries?

4. Do you think they are worth the cost?

For the most part the responses are positive, with reservations. The consensus is that these websites and forums help drive potential patients to contact the physicians, resulting in consultations that are then converted into surgeries. Even if the number of consults and surgeries isn't increased, there is the feel that membership on some of these sites increases exposure and improves the overall standing of the physicians' reputation and stature on the internet. Some established physicians are afraid to stop advertising on the websites as it could negatively affect their business.

5. Do they create false exclusionary, insular social networks?

By building a community of physicians who are advertised as being the best in the specialty, it appears that the message to potential patients is, if you are going to have surgery, you shouldn't think of going to a doctor outside this network. Although some magnanimous posters support surgeons outside the network, the posts and threads on the IDFs generally support the exclusion of doctors who aren't on the list. It is true that physicians have been banned from the sites. They cannot post and any mention of their name in a post merits deletion of that post. These are places where grudges are held, doctors are ostracized, and the silent treatment is sometimes the treatment of choice. On the other hand, many surgeons are able to show before and after photos that are representative of their work. Those who get excellent results are able to showcase their successes on these websites and forums.

"They should say that the members' are excellent, but they should also say that only those who contact them and pay fees appear." This comment best sums up the common sentiment. There would be added value if the criteria to determine who is excellent were revealed. There are also concerns about ongoing credentialing of the advertisers after the initial vetting process.

So there appears to a double-edged sword here. The above comments from Cyberspace indicate that, although construed as a necessary evil, having become diluted by lists too long and considered expensive and exclusionary, there continues to be support from those who feel their reputations, presence, and stature, as well as number of surgeries, can be increased by paying to be "recommended" on these websites. ♦