

What to Say When the Media Calls Your Office Asking for Your Comment

When the media contacts you or your practice, looking for a comment or a reaction, you likely think one of two things: “Oh, wonderful!” or “Oh, no!”

It’s essential that you — or someone on your team — be readily prepared to respond to media inquiries. Ignore them at your peril: refusing media requests or replying with an injudicious “No comment” can have negative consequences for your practice and your professional reputation.

Of course, this doesn’t mean you should be intimidated by media requests. Remember: the media needs you as a source as much as you want them for publicity. With a little preparation, these can be opportunities to promote your practice and expertise.

Because you probably don’t have time to handle all public relations yourself, you can designate a member of your office staff as the Media Contact for all such requests. This individual should be well-spoken and able to “think on his or her feet” and should have access to a clearly written media policy about what information will and will not be released publicly, as well as about how to respond to reviews — see our blog article of 8 April 2016 ([“How to Deal with Negative Online Reviews”](#)).

Patient information, obviously, is always confidential. Also, if the laws of your country protect the privacy of employees or prohibit the disclosure of sensitive business information, this should be spelled out in your media policy. Your Media Contact team member should be thoroughly versed in this policy, and every member of your staff should understand that all media contact is to go through this designated person.

You will find it to your advantage to get to know journalists and editors at your local media outlets (such as television, newspapers and magazines), whenever possible. Reaching out from time to time with press releases about popular procedures, patient trends, recognitions you’ve recently received, your own professional writing and scholarship, etc., will then be a much more pleasant process (see the article on press releases, also in this e-magazine), as will correcting any inaccurate information about you or your practice that may find its way into the press.

It goes without saying that everything you say to the media, in person and in writing, must be truthful and accurate. Half-truths or exaggeration will be discovered quickly, and you certainly don’t want to break the public’s sense of trust in you. Remember, everything you say to the press is “on the record.” The same is true for speaking about subjects outside your area of expertise. Stick to what you know well — you certainly don’t want any hasty or misspoken words coming back to cause problems (weeks, months or even years) later. Instead, you can helpfully refer the journalist to another source who may be able to provide the answers needed. This has the advantage of portraying you in a positive light, as well, instead of a negative. “Well,” (you could say,) “that isn’t precisely something I can speak to. But let me think, yes, perhaps you’d like to discuss that with [name], who is better versed in that area.”

But what if you're asked about a sensitive topic, such as a complaint from a patient? "Of course it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any specific patient information. However, I sincerely appreciate feedback, and make it a practice to ask for my patients' opinions," and then you can refer the journalist to the site where you have responded to the complaint. If you haven't yet heard such a complaint, or haven't had time to respond to a particular review, you can direct the journalist to your Media Contact.

What about a question regarding misconduct involving a colleague? In the case where such an event has been proven in a court of law, you and your Media Contact staff member should immediately discuss and prepare a response. If an investigation is still underway, however, that is outside your area of expertise. ALWAYS follow this immediately with a positive statement – you feel confident that the matter will be resolved quickly, you are appreciative for the support of the community, etc.

Always speak in plain terms that average readers and listeners can understand. Avoid jargon and specialized medical nomenclature. And of course, always be courteous: the way the media sees you is the way they will present you to the public. This includes returning calls and emails in a timely manner, and being upfront when you aren't sure of an answer or need more time. Promise to follow up with your answer before their deadline – and then keep your promise.

Most reporters are happy to read back your quotes from the interview to ensure accuracy, though they're generally less enthusiastic about requests to review their work before it is published. If the published version contains minor omissions or errors, don't worry about those. If there are any important inaccuracies, you can issue a statement on your own website and social media pages. It is never, ever a good idea to go "over the head" of reporters by contacting their editor or supervisor. Show them you respect their ability to do their job, and they'll likely show you the same courtesy.

There's an old saying that there's no such thing as bad publicity – which of course isn't always true. But if you use media opportunities wisely, they can be an invaluable – and free – platform to spread the word about your practice and your work.