

How Canberra Judges a Clinic

We read every written Google review left in the five years to 18 September 2026 for Canberra and Queanbeyan dentists, physiotherapists, chiropractors, massage therapists and myotherapists, podiatrists, osteopaths and orthodontists: 24,035 reviews of 540 listings. This is what patients write once the appointment is over, and how much of it a registered practice is allowed to use.

Give me ten minutes of your attention and you will know three things: how many of your good reviews you can put in your own advertising, why replying to them carries a risk most practices haven't noticed, and what patients write about when they're happy.

The one thing to know

A registered practice can't use a review in its advertising if the review mentions anything clinical: a symptom or the reason for the visit, the diagnosis or treatment, the outcome, or the practitioner's skill or experience. Under the National Law those reviews are testimonials, and testimonials are banned from health advertising. That rules out three in four good reviews. Of 17,849 positive reviews of registered practices, only 4,521 (25.3 per cent) leave out anything clinical and talk only about the experience: the welcome, the kindness, the clean rooms, the booking.

We expected at least half to be usable. It came in at one in four. For a typical practice it's lower again: about one in five of its good reviews are usable (19.6 per cent, averaged across the 259 practices with at least five good reviews). The busiest practices have more usable reviews than most, and that lifts the overall figure. Of 336 registered practices with positive reviews, 91 don't have a single usable review from the last five years.

Six in ten of those positive reviews (11,197 of 17,849) already have a reply from the practice. More than half of the reviews with a reply mention something clinical. Ahpra's advertising guidelines warn that engaging with a review may count as using a testimonial to advertise.

What we reckon. It's easy to think of your Google reviews as free marketing. For a registered practice, three quarters of them can't be used, and the part that can is about the front desk, the room and the manner. That's good news, because those are the parts a practice controls on a Tuesday afternoon.

Five things you want, and what the reviews say about each

Our research points to five things a practice needs to get right. Each section below takes one, shows what Canberra's reviews say about it, and ends with a quick check you can run on your own practice.

The checks work best with three things in front of you: your last twenty Google reviews, your replies to them, and your last complaint. What to do about what you find comes after the five sections.

1. You want to use your best reviews. Most of them you can't.

A review is a testimonial when it says something positive about the clinical side of care. Ahpra lists what counts as clinical: a symptom or reason for the visit, the diagnosis or treatment, the outcome, and the practitioner's skill or experience. Comments about customer service or communication style that leave all of that out aren't testimonials, and a practice may use them.

We checked every positive review for three things: anything clinical, general praise of the practitioner's skill, and praise of the experience. Of 17,849 positive reviews of registered practices, 10,056 (56.3 per cent) mention something clinical. 8,969 (50.2 per cent) praise the practitioner's skill in general terms, like "best dentist in Canberra" or "she's amazing". 4,521 (25.3 per cent) do neither and praise the experience. Even read generously, counting general praise of skill as usable, the figure only rises to 7,633 (42.8 per cent). Still short of half.

The usable reviews read like this one. A grandparent wrote that a four-year-old enjoyed her dental visit because the dentist was warm and put her completely at ease. Nothing clinical, all experience.

It varies by profession. Dentistry has the highest usable share (28.0 per cent of 11,466 positive reviews, 136 practices), then chiropractic (26.1 per cent of 1,698, 41 practices). Physiotherapy (17.4 per cent of 2,248, 99 practices), osteopathy (17.9 per cent of 407, 17 practices) and podiatry (20.0 per cent of 794, 25 practices) sit lower. Their reviews mention clinical detail more often: 64.7 per cent of positive physiotherapy reviews do, against 53.5 per cent for dentistry.

Check yours. Take your last twenty five-star reviews and sort them into two piles. Pile one: any mention of pain, an injury, a condition, a treatment, a result, or how good the practitioner is. Pile two: everything else. Only pile two goes near your website, your social posts or your ads, and only whole. Ahpra advises against editing reviews to make them fit: its testimonials guidance says only "complete and unedited reviews that are not testimonials" help avoid a breach. So don't keep the one friendly sentence and cut the clinical one.

What this can't tell you: whether any single review is safe to use. We sorted reviews to count them, which isn't a legal check. A borderline review needs a person to read it against the guidelines, or advice.

2. You want to thank everyone who reviews you. Watch what you're thanking them for.

62.7 per cent of positive reviews of registered practices have a reply from the practice: 11,197 of 17,849, from 204 of 336 practices. 6,300 of the reviews with a reply mention something clinical, and 4,451 name a condition or a treatment.

Ahpra's guidelines say a practice isn't responsible for removing testimonials on platforms it doesn't control, such as Google. The same section adds that a practice "should take care if they choose to engage with reviews on a third-party site as this may be considered using a testimonial to advertise a regulated health service". Ahpra's earlier guidance on testimonials (June 2019) put it more plainly: a breach "may occur if a health service provider uses the review to advertise, by responding to the review or by re-publishing it on their website".

What we reckon. Reply to every review is standard advice for any small business, and 204 of 336 registered practices here do it. For a registered practice, a reply thanking a patient for sharing how their back pain went is engaging with a testimonial. We're not saying any of these 6,300 replies is a breach. That's for Ahpra to decide. We're saying the habit is common and the risk is written down.

Check yours. Open your last ten replies. For each one, ask two questions: does the review mention anything clinical, and does the reply repeat it, agree with it or thank the patient for it? If the answer to both is yes, change how you reply. The front-desk checklist at the back has a safer way to do it.

What this can't tell you: what any reply actually says. We counted whether a reply was there, and didn't read the wording.

3. You want to be judged on how you treat people. And you are.

Being professional and courteous is the most common specific thing patients praise: 12,399 of 22,321 positive reviews (55.5 per cent), and 399 of 438 practices have at least one. The clinic itself (clean rooms, parking, the waiting area) comes up in 2,189 reviews (9.8 per cent) across 259 practices.

These are also the things a registered practice can use. Kindness, courtesy, a calm room and a welcoming front desk aren't clinical, as long as the review leaves the treatment out.

A patient who gets nervous about the dentist wrote that the team were incredibly helpful, and recommended the practice. Nothing clinical, and exactly what the next nervous patient wants to read.

What we reckon. In most businesses, everyone's reviews say "friendly", so it tells a stranger nothing. For a registered practice it's different. Manner is the one strong thing it's allowed to show, so a practice with twenty reviews about a kind front desk has something to put on its website that a competitor with two hundred reviews about pain relief doesn't.

Check yours. Look at pile two from section 1. How many of those reviews mention your reception, your rooms or how someone was made to feel? If there are none, patients aren't remembering those things, and that's worth knowing before you spend money telling them.

What this can't tell you: whether manner decides who books. Reviews are written after the visit, by people who came.

4. You want patients to know what's happening to them. Few reviews say they did.

About one positive review in nine mentions having the diagnosis or plan explained: 2,642 of 22,321 (11.8 per cent), across 257 practices. A result comes up in 5,076 (22.7 per cent), across 376 practices.

Both are clinical under Ahpra's definition, so neither kind of review can go in a registered practice's advertising. They matter for a different reason: explaining things hardly ever shows up in reviews, and it's something every practitioner can do at the end of every appointment.

What we reckon. Reviews can't tell you whether most practitioners explain things well and patients don't bother writing it down, or whether most don't explain at all. What they do show is that patients who were told what was wrong and what happens next remember it and say so. That changes how the patient feels about their care, even though the practice can't then advertise the review.

Check yours. Ask whoever finishes the appointment to say three things before the patient leaves: what we found, what we did, and what happens next. Then read your next twenty reviews and see whether any mention it.

What this can't tell you: how well any practice actually explains things. A patient who was told everything may still never write about it.

5. You don't want the complaint nobody owns.

Complaints are rare. 748 of 22,965 reviews (3.3 per cent) are one or two stars, from 200 practices. But one bad review can sit near the top of a listing for years.

We went back over all 748 a second time to make sure these figures hold. Two things stand out. The treatment or its result comes up in 324 of the 748 (43.3 per cent, 124 practices), and how the patient was treated by people comes up in 310 (41.4 per cent, 123 practices). Reception and admin staff are mentioned in 114 (15.2 per cent). After that, the complaints spread out: poor value in 113, feeling pushed into treatment or packages in 112, not being listened to or not having things explained in 109, and nobody following up or owning the problem in 93. Waiting and cancellations come up in 83, and billing and health-fund claims in 84. Half the low-star reviews (378 of 748) have a reply from the practice.

What we reckon. One complaint in eight is about nobody following up, like a call that never came back or a refund that stalled. Of everything in this section, that's the one a practice owner controls most directly.

Check yours. Take your last complaint, whether it came in a review, by phone or at the desk. Who owned it, what was the next step, and who checked it was closed? If you can't name all three, the next one will go the same way.

What this can't tell you: how often things go wrong. Reviews only show the complaints people chose to write.

Choose one change

Write down one thing you found, what you'll do about it and who's doing it. Pick something you can check next month: whether pile two grew, whether your replies stopped engaging with clinical detail, whether

the three-part close happens at the end of every appointment. Then read your next twenty reviews and see if it shows up.

Where Well Handled comes in

Some of what's in this report is yours alone: the care itself, how a complaint is handled, what goes on the invoice. Well Handled doesn't touch those.

Where we come in is the bit between the phone ringing and the patient being booked, and what a stranger sees before they ever ring.

The call reception couldn't take. When every line is busy or the front desk is with a patient, Well Handled's missed-call service texts the caller back straight away, so the booking doesn't go to the next practice on the list.

What a stranger reads before they book. The things a registered practice is allowed to show (manner, the front desk, the room, how nervous patients are looked after) are exactly what your website and Google profile can say plainly. We build and look after both, and we never put a clinical review on a site we build.

Reviews and replies, within the rules. A neutral request to every patient asks about the visit, not the treatment, with no incentive and no picking. Replies thank patients for their feedback without repeating or engaging with anything clinical, the same way the checklist below sets out.

What do your own reviews say?

This report tells you what Canberra writes about practices like yours. It can't tell you what your patients write about you.

Text a link to your Google listing to **0495 032 269**, or email it to **kai@wellhandled.au**. You'll get one page on your own reviews: how many sit in pile two and could be used, how many of your replies engage with clinical detail, what your patients praise compared with the practices around you, and one thing worth trying. If you haven't got enough reviews to say anything honest, we'll tell you.

Front-desk checklist

For whoever looks after your reviews, your replies and your website. This page is made to be printed and pinned up on its own. This isn't legal advice, and Ahpra can't give it either. Where a review or reply is borderline, ask your legal adviser or indemnity insurer, as Ahpra's own guidelines suggest.

Before you use a review anywhere

Read the whole review. If it mentions a symptom, a condition, the reason for the visit, a diagnosis, a treatment, a result or the practitioner's skill, don't use it.

Use a review whole or not at all. Don't trim it to the friendly sentence, and never edit a mixed or negative review to make it look positive.

The same rules apply on every platform you control, including your website and your business social media, and to anyone who posts for you. An agency acting for you is an advertiser too. If a platform won't let you remove clinical reviews, Ahpra's guidelines suggest switching its reviews function off.

The guidelines don't say anything specific about star ratings or review widgets. Get advice before you put one on your site.

Before you reply to a review

If the review mentions anything clinical, keep the reply to thanks for the feedback about the visit. Don't repeat, confirm or discuss the symptom, the treatment or the result.

Don't reply on autopilot. Read the review first.

For a complaint, take it off the page: thank them, say who will call, and then make sure that person calls.

Asking for reviews

Never offer anything in return for a review, and never remove or hide a genuine negative one. Consumer law covers every profession in this report.

Massage and myotherapy

Massage therapists and myotherapists aren't Ahpra-registered, so the testimonial ban doesn't apply to them. The ACT Code of Conduct for Health Care Workers does: a worker must not misinform clients. Consumer law applies as it does to everyone.

Complaints

Every complaint gets an owner, a next step and a check that it closed.

How we did this

What we read. Every written Google review left between 18 September 2021 and 18 September 2026 for dentists, physiotherapists, chiropractors, massage therapists and myotherapists, podiatrists, osteopaths and orthodontists serving Canberra and

Queanbeyan: 24,035 reviews of 540 listings. Where listings shared a phone number or website, we counted them as one practice, which gave 446. Of those reviews, 22,965 describe a patient's own experience of the listed service, and those are behind every figure here. Star-only reviews, enquiries that never became a visit, and reviews about another service (a spa treatment, or a GP visit at a shared clinic) were left out.

How we sorted them. We sorted every review into topics from a fixed list we use for every edition of How Canberra Judges, with each one tied to the reviewer's own words. Each positive review was also marked for anything clinical, general praise of the practitioner's skill, and praise of the experience. A review only counts as usable when the whole review praises the experience and mentions nothing clinical. Every one- and two-star review was checked a second time, and only figures that passed our accuracy checks have numbers here.

Who the rules cover. Registered practices are those in Ahpra-regulated professions. Massage and myotherapy aren't Ahpra-registered and are reported separately: 27.8 per cent of their 4,472 positive reviews would pass the same strict test, even though the test doesn't bind them.

How solid the numbers are. Dentistry makes up about half the reviews we read. Take it out and the usable share drops from 25.3 to 20.6 per cent. Counting every practice equally gives 19.6 per cent. Orthodontics has too few practices to report on its own.

The rules we checked against. Read 23 September 2026: Ahpra, Guidelines for advertising a regulated health service (issued 14 December 2020), sections 3.2, 4.3.1, 4.3.2 and 4.3.3; Ahpra, Testimonials in health advertising (June 2019); Ahpra's testimonials page; Ahpra, Advertising and the law; the ACT Human Rights Commission pages on the Code of Conduct for Health Care Workers; the ACCC's online reviews page. Penalties for advertising breaches reach \$60,000 per offence for an individual and \$120,000 for a body corporate, from July 2024 (Ahpra, Advertising and the law). The December 2020 Guidelines still show the older \$5,000 and \$10,000 limits. This report isn't advertising for any practice and names none.

What reviews can't show. People choose whether to write a review, and we can't confirm every reviewer was a patient. We don't know which practices ask for reviews, or how. A mention isn't the same as a happy patient or good clinical care, and nothing here shows why a patient chose a practice. Owner replies were counted, not read. Names are left out of every example, and no example pairs a condition or treatment with anything that could identify someone. The words may still be found on Google.

Checking our work. The full technical method and every check are written up. Think a figure's wrong? Tell us which section through wellhandled.au and we'll look at it.

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