

Feature

The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the North American Dental Community

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected an unbelievable percentage of the population since it caught fire in the first quarter of 2020. Being an essential service, you may believe the field of dentistry to be untouched by the pandemic, but that is far from true. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the dental industry, just as it has on so many others. It has affected both dentists and patients. What follows is an examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both dental practices and the patients themselves.

A drop in revenue for dental practices

Drop in revenue for dental practices is one of the more noticeable impacts COVID-19 has caused across North America. When lockdowns initially began, dental practices started to close. This was not due to mandates put forth by local governments but due to the unique characteristics of the dental setting. With the risk of cross-contamination within dental offices being higher than many other professions and without (initially) adequate protective measures put into place, there was a real fear and anxiety among dental professionals regarding the risk of contracting COVID-19. This was a factor in the widespread closures of dental practices during the early months of the pandemic and one which left many dental professionals concerned about the long-term financial impact.

BMC Oral Health conducted an electronic cross-sectional survey among dentists in several countries between April and May 2020. This survey's purpose was to drill down and find what dental practice-related and country-level factors affected dental practice closures. It was found that there was a higher likelihood of practice closure among private sector practices than those in the non-private sector. Rural dental practices were also found to be less likely to close during the pandemic than those in urban areas.

While many dental professionals suspect they will continue to see some revenue decrease throughout 2021, they are confident that practice closures will be avoided so that they can continue to treat patients.

A change in procedure

Another noticeable impact that COVID-19 has had on the dental industry is how in-office procedures are carried out. The pandemic has forced the hand of many dentists to completely revamp the methods used in-office so that the health of dentists, dental hygienists and patients are all protected from the COVID-19 virus. This change in practice was necessary for physical health and well-being and for the mental health of both dentist and patient.

Throughout 2020 and early 2021, patients who had long-standing dental appointments were weary and felt anxiety about keeping these appointments. There is no other medical profession more closely intimate around the mouth area. Poking fingers and prodding instruments exploring mouths when, at the time, there were more than 25,000 daily cases of COVID-19 being reported left many patients incredibly anxious about willingly submitting themselves to the experience. The guidance provided to dentists to start diminishing the chance of infection included having patients washing their hands and rinsing with antimicrobial mouthwash, which played a part in reducing some of this anxiety.

Still, the use of drills, scalers and air polishers had to continue, all of which tend to produce droplets of the patient's saliva that hang in the air. These droplets all have the potential of carrying the deadly COVID-19 virus. Because of the risks involved, dental offices are operating in a much different fashion than they did prior to the start of the pandemic.

Dentists and hygienists are adorning themselves with masks, face shields, gloves, gowns, etc., to protect themselves. They have relied more heavily upon hand tools to minimize airborne particles, and patients are being contacted days before their appointment to see if they have any COVID-like symptoms. Waiting rooms have been deserted as patients are asked to wait in their cars until they are called in. Patients are required to wear masks and have their temperature taken as they enter the dental office. It is a different world!

A Surge in Grinding

While the pandemic has affected dental professionals in many ways, it has also affected one particular dental affliction more than any other. The pandemic has impacted people all over North America somehow, and this has put everybody on edge. Dentists are seeing an astronomical rise in teeth grinding, which is also called bruxism due to the stress and anxiety this pandemic has caused.

Anxiety and stress over a very uncertain future are manifesting, causing an increase in alcohol consumption. Studies show that consumption of alcohol has risen 14 percent in adults. Women appear to have been especially susceptible to alcohol consumption, with an increase of 41% in that same timeframe. Alcohol use is a trigger for bruxism, and it is showing in the number of cases dental professionals are seeing now. This increase in alcohol consumption is undoubtedly caused by the stress and anxiety put on individuals during this pandemic and the associated depression that has reared its ugly head because of these stresses.

Bruxism has been a common problem in the dental community, but the rise in new cases of bruxism is alarming. Patients who have never clenched or grinded before are facing this affliction in growing numbers. Experts believe the rise in bruxism is linked with sleep patterns and processes taking place within the central nervous system. Bruxism is also associated with risk factors, including anxiety, high levels of stress, and heavy alcohol use. All of these have increased among the population of North America during this pandemic.

There is no doubting the affect which the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the dental community throughout 2020 and 2021. The effects of this pandemic are likely going to be far-reaching for years to come. This is especially true as the Delta variant rears its ugly head. Patients and dental professionals alike will continue to be affected.

About the Author



Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with Naren. You may also schedule a session at your convenience with the Senior Director of Marketing – Lila, by clicking

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