

Is dentistry facing the ultimate dilemma?



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In the aftermath of the spring lockdown dentists are facing the prospect of trying to increase patient numbers whilst also observing fallow time requirements, which makes sustaining a profitable business a challenge. **Guy Meyers**, Director of Customer Success at Software of Excellence, a Henry Schein One brand, advises dentists to weigh up their options and stay positive.

When practice doors slammed closed on 26 March, it was a dark day for dentistry and the oral health of the nation. Now, as once again we are in the middle of 'lockdown' – although thankfully with dental practices able to remain open – it seems the the 'new normal' looks very different to the old.

Balancing act

So, whilst it's important that dentistry builds on the roots of recovery that were established over the summer, dentists are still facing a delicate balancing act; on the one hand patient and staff safety and on the other the desire to ensure the restoration of oral health. But a third tension is also being brought to bear, - as financial pressures grow and limitations on patient flow remain, the equilibrium between being open and able to treat patients and remaining financially viable, is fragile. Indeed, in a recent video

message to mark the launch of updated Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) guidance, Martin Woodrow, Chief Executive of the BDA, made it clear that patient numbers are unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels for some time, saying 'there will continue to be limitations on the amount of care that can be delivered... enhanced cleaning, social distancing and the physical demands of working under high level PPE they [dental teams] are simply unable to see as many patients as before.'

Be prepared

The single most important thing dentists did during lockdown was to prepare for re-opening and most did this very successfully and have reaped the rewards of patients returning for both routine and elective treatments. Now, as we face a still uncertain future dentists once again need to prepare their businesses for the coming months and concentrate on reducing the risk of

contacted automatically via text when their appointment is due.

Patient flow

Dentistry is reliant on close proximity between patients and dentists and as dental professionals, it's important to empathise with patients who are still fearful about having dental treatment.

For all practices, patient flow needs to be more carefully managed than previously, but it's a fact that introducing some of the recommended measures actually improves patients' experience – fewer patients in the waiting area and patients only called when the surgery has been decontaminated are positive changes for most patients.

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In addition, there are numerous ways in which confidence in dentistry can be maintained:

- **Shielding clinics** – some practices have introduced specific clinic times for elderly or vulnerable patients, and these remain an important factor during the 'second wave'
- **Stagger appointments** – reduce the number of people who are waiting (either inside or outside) at any one time. Staggered appointments are easy to manage via your dental software
- **Be on time** – ask patients to arrive on time and not be early for appointments
- **Go contactless** – send links to medical history forms and consents direct to patients' mobiles so they can be completed at home. By completing forms on their own devices and submitting electronically, patients can avoid touching paper and pens that have been used by others
- **Hygiene station** – if you haven't already, set up a hygiene station, where patients can wash and sanitise their hands, on arrival and if possible, have their temperature taken
- **Follow ups** – normally follow-ups would be about ongoing treatment, but practices should routinely make contact after 14 days to check patients who have attended the practice are not showing any symptoms of the virus.

transmission for patients (and staff) in the practice and on mitigating fear, by continuing to build patient confidence.

Communicate

As was the case during lockdown, patient communication at this time remains vital. Establishing regular communication, letting patients know how they can access emergency treatment, what other treatments are available at your practice, general tips for maintaining good oral hygiene and sharing the measures you have put in place to ensure patient safety, will all help to reassure patients and keep oral health front of mind.

You should use your dental software to build lists of patients who have missed check-ups, but it's important that you do not schedule all of these at once and block your diary. When patients call to book a routine check-up, use short-notice list functionality to fill gaps that cannot be taken up with other treatments. In this way patients requiring check-ups will be

A positive future

Those practices with an NHS contract and those solely reliant on private patient fees both face issues, which are different, but nevertheless challenging in their own right. Private dentists, many of whom felt cast adrift during the lockdown itself, have been largely left to their own devices. However, some, including Ben Atkins, President of the Oral Health Foundation, have found positives from the change in circumstances. Ben points to virtual consultations as one area in which the patient experience has been massively improved, brought about by dentists being forced to change the way in which they work.

In the same way, online booking, remote form filling and contactless arrival and departures are all elements of the patient journey which have been 'normalised' by the pandemic and have now created a more patient-centric environment, which will ultimately benefit patients and in the long run will result in increased revenue streams for practices.

The response to coronavirus is constantly changing and the pandemic has already had a massive impact on people and businesses. In dentistry, there remain serious questions around funding, clawbacks, contracts, and the ability of some private practices to remain solvent without any specific government support, but despite these issues, we believe the profession can emerge stronger from the challenge. This feeling is borne out by the results of a recent survey¹ in which 57% of respondents felt more positive than negative about the future success of their practice. This fact alone should give us all reason to be optimistic.

Reference

1. Software of Excellence. The Dental Survey 2020. Commissioned by Software of Excellence. Online October 2020. Data on file.

Author biography

Guy Meyers joined Software of Excellence in 2013. Since then he has been instrumental in helping drive the company's focus on the role of software in determining business outcomes and has played a key role in rolling out the Customer Success Programme

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