



Overcoming COVID-necessary barriers for a better patient experience

How welcome - or unwelcome - are you making your patients feel?

By Julie Parker

Prior to COVID, creating a welcoming experience for patients when they enter your practice was one of our higher priorities. When the pandemic hit, this objective was pushed to the side in place of new health and safety measures. We imagined this would be a temporary shift in focus.

It has been over a year now and we are still working with additional systems of infection control. While some systems will not be necessary long-term, others, I imagine, are here to stay.

Dental surgeries in Australia have been successful over the years in adapting to new infection threats and updating systems to ensure a safe environment for both patients and staff. COVID has been no different. However, this need not come at the expense of the patient experience.

Many dental practices have entrance signage warning patients not to enter if unwell or if there has been any contact with the virus. There are some practices I have seen who have their front door locked and a doorbell is rung and the patient quizzed before being allowed to enter. Upon entry, there are more signs, hand sanitisers and masks. Moving to the reception area, there is a masked-up receptionist behind a perspex screen. Patients must sit in the appropriate seat to avoid being too close to anyone else and when taken through to the surgery, are faced with clinical staff donned in surgical gowns, masks and face shields.

Communication is difficult.

Reading subtle facial cues and expressions is no longer possible.

The muffled voices coming from behind the barriers, shields and masks are difficult to hear and understand.

There is limited opportunity to build rapport.

And no one sees each other smile.

This is not the experience dental practices would normally choose for their patients. We have always strived to create an environment that is calm, warm and friendly. Much effort is expended to ensure that patients are informed, educated and supported throughout their dental examination, diagnosis and selection of treatment options.

These objectives need not, and should not, change.

Overcoming the COVID barriers to a welcoming patient experience

Iam going to discuss my thoughts on six COVID-induced barriers that I see as having a negative impact on the patient experience. And I will offer some ideas to overcome them.

A pre-requisite is that dental practices are only seeing healthy people who are not experiencing any symptoms of illness and who have not been in contact with the virus. Environmental cleaning is performed after each visitor to the practice.

An additional consideration is that every new system that a practice implements comes with staff time and practice expense to execute and maintain. An efficient, productive and happy working environment should only be establishing systems that have a clear purpose or solve a recurring problem.

Temperature testing

This is a direct quote from the Australian Government Department of Health: *“While in places like hospitals and aged care facilities, temperature checks may be useful as an extra precaution to protect vulnerable people, temperature checks are not as useful in other settings. This is because people with COVID-19 don’t always develop fever, or may be on medication that reduces their temperature. It is also possible that the person may have a temperature for another reason unrelated to COVID-19. Also bear in mind that body temperature measurement is affected by the method used, the site, the time of day and the patient’s age, as well as their medical condition.”*

Given that temperature testing is not considered useful in settings outside of hospitals and aged care facilities and that the results of the testing can be completely unrelated to COVID, I question whether this system needs to stay at all.

Visitor log

The visitor log is certainly a system that can be avoided. These logs are a requirement of venues that do not have a way of tracking human movement. A few examples listed by the Health Department are sporting arenas, museums, movie theatres, places of worship and libraries. Dental practices have dental software that tracks all appointments and houses patients contact details. Practitioners can easily log visitors who accompany patients within their clinical notes, such as “patient attended with mother”. Staff movement is registered through rosters and payroll information.

Surgical gowns

The webinars that the ADA presented during the start of the pandemic which detailed how to make dental practices safe were excellent and very clear in their directives. Only seeing healthy patients who had no contact with the virus, performing environmental cleaning after each visitor, having the patients use a pre-procedural mouth rinse and reducing aerosols all combine to make our practices safe. There is no need to also wear surgical gowns to keep patients safe.

Hand sanitiser

Hand-sanitising is likely here to stay. Because of this, it is best if a proper hands-free hand-sanitising station is installed. Many practices have hand-pumps which creates a touch-point for everyone, making the hand sanitising pump itself a potential vehicle for cross-contamination. Installing a sleek, hygienic station that is easy to maintain and clean is a good move.

Perspex screens

I'm hoping that the screens that have been installed in most practices can be removed at some stage. They are a physical barrier to patient interaction, are often reflective and difficult to see through when approaching and limit the available space for managing patient payments, treatment plans and other paperwork.

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While these screens are in place, ensure they are tilted or have a non-reflective film so your patients can actually see the receptionist clearly. Clean them frequently and avoid wearing a mask in addition to sitting behind the screen. If you do, project your voice and speak clearly so patients can easily hear and understand you.

Masks

Mask-wearing outside of the clinical areas is often needed, but only if a 1.5-metre distance cannot be maintained. If you have proper distance, take off your mask when speaking with patients. Let them see your welcoming face and friendly smile. Afford them the benefit of your effective communication.

COVID may be around for a long time. Identifying ways to continually improve your patients' experiences despite the additional infection control measures will help you to be around for a long time as well.

About the author

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