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DENTISTRY BEYOND 2020: LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

By Linda Harvey

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To say that 2020 was a year of rapid change is an understatement. After a brief shutdown of practices across the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the dental industry reopened with the adoption of new technologies, stricter infection control guidelines and a renewed focus on personal and team wellness. So, what's on the horizon for 2021? While it's impossible to predict the future, let's revisit what we learned this year and plan for a better year ahead.

Personalizing “touchless” processes

Serenity-designed reception areas equipped with beverage stations were dramatically remodeled this year. Instead, patients now experience remote and car-side check in. Beverage stations have been replaced with sanitization stations, and reception areas now sit mostly empty.

Many of these redesigned office procedures will most likely continue indefinitely. Remote check-in, online forms, and text-to-pay or online payments have streamlined business office procedures, allowing your team to focus on other key functions. But that brings up the question: how do you safely reincorporate the personal touch your patients loved about your practice?

Be sure to maintain at least one—and ideally more—personal touch points throughout the check-in and checkout process. Freshen up your telephone skills so patients feel the connection when calling the office. With the check-in and checkout process more abbreviated than before, rely on good eye contact and voice inflection to make the patient feel welcome. Also, evaluate the customizable features of your communication platforms. For example, are your emails and text messages addressed with the patient's name or are they generic messages?

Don't forget to be social! Incorporate personalized social media posts about the practice along with educational and general informational posts. Demonstrating a continued sense of connection and well-being ensures patients will return to your practice without hesitancy or concern.

Clinical adaptations

The recent changes in the clinical arena parallel the transition to wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) in the late 1980s. Prior to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)'s [Bloodborne Pathogens Standard](#), dentistry was practiced in the “wet finger environment” referring to a time when gloves, masks and protective eyewear were not worn.

Now as a result of COVID-19, we have new layers of PPE including uniform caps, face shields and respirator masks, along with additional equipment such as HVE (High Volume Evacuation) for hygienists, extra-oral suction devices and air-purification systems.

It's too early to predict if OSHA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or state law will require respirator use in dental settings on a permanent basis. But we can expect the CDC to update the [2003 Guidelines for Infection Control in Dental Health-Care Settings](#) in the future. This was acknowledged by a representative of the CDC who addressed the Organization for Safety Asepsis and Prevention (OSAP) Virtual Annual Conference in August 2020. And when considering aerosols, spray and spatter, the continued use of a face shield and head cap in addition to masks makes good sense.

What is the status of PPE? Several U.S. mask manufacturers indicated they are increasing production, which is good news. However, according to one glove expert, William E. Harris III, we can expect the shortage of exam gloves to continue for as long as 2-4 years. This lag time is due to the complexity of glove manufacturing and the increased global demand. Now more than ever, it's critical to adhere to established safety protocols by wearing puncture resistant gloves when cleaning an operatory and processing contaminated instruments. Doing so saves on exam gloves, ensures compliance (OSHA, state law and CDC) and optimizes team safety. When it comes to protective gowns and jackets, more offices have now installed a washer/dryer or contracted with a laundry service to decrease dependence on disposable gowns.

Self-care and team care

The year 2020 has been a time of rapid change that continues to profoundly impact our personal and professional lives. Some team members found themselves in the role of teacher for their children; others continued working by caring for emergency patients, while others did not return to work. As a result, stress levels have been unusually high this year.

In addition to adhering to the required safety protocols (OSHA, CDC and state law), don't forget to take care of yourself as well. Experts provide sound strategies for coping with stress and staying positive. Exercising, having a support group and eating healthy are just a few examples. If you don't regularly exercise, simply start with a walk around the block. The physical act of being outside can be very relaxing. Rely on the support of friends and family to vent as well as discuss ways to make things better on a personal level. It's important to not simply focus on the negative aspects of change, but to identify any positive outcomes.

During your workday, take "breathing breaks" when you can safely take off your mask, hydrate with water and take a few deep breaths. Maybe even incorporate a few stretches along the way. You just may find that more invigorating than mid-afternoon coffee or a sugary snack.

On an optimistic note, as of October 16, 2020, there were [137 COVID-19 vaccines under development](#). Eleven of them are in Phase 3 human trials, which is the last step to approval. By mid-year, Dr. Robert Redfield, Director of the CDC, expects every American to have access to a vaccine – free of charge.

Success in the new year will require shifting from crisis thinking to a mindset of leadership and resilience. So continue your professional development along with adapting and incorporating new skills and behaviors as we prepare for the new year ahead.

About the author

A nationally-recognized healthcare risk management and compliance expert, Linda Harvey, MS, RDH, HRM, assists dentists and teams in navigating regulatory requirements. She is the founder and president of two compliance-related companies.

During her programs, Linda draws from real-world experience, having worked with offices that have undergone HIPAA, OSHA and Infection Control audits. Linda's programs will challenge you to look at your compliance programs from a different perspective, particularly amid the COVID-19 crisis.

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