



Dentists look back at challenging time

by Joseph DeRosier

IT WAS A YEAR AGO, EARLY IN THE SUMMER OF 2020, THAT DENTAL PRACTICES IN THE METROPOLITAN CHICAGO AREA STARTED TO WELCOME BACK PATIENTS AFTER MOST CLOSED THEIR DOORS TO ROUTINE PROCEDURES IN THE EARLY WEEKS OF THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY.

Dental professionals are still feeling the effects of the pandemic even as the number of people receiving vaccine shots grows. But there is hope that the end is within sight.

It is still unclear, however, just what “normal” will be like after the SARS-CoV-2 virus swept through the country.

Dental practices made changes in the physical environment of offices, revised procedures and added personal protective equipment.

But Roger Levin, the principal of the Levin Group, a dental practice management consultancy firm, said overall, it could have been worse.

“We’re very fortunate to be in dentistry,” Dr. Levin said. “Dentistry held up far better than many other industries.”

He said dentistry experienced a number of first-time events, including a shut-down, a reopening that included extreme pent-up demand, followed by a slowdown that had practices experience declines of 5% to 10%, according to his data.

“Even though we hit a decline, the single mitigating factor was the economy,” Dr. Levin explained. “The doomsday scenario would have been a pandemic plus a deep recession. . . The economy has held up well and, according to most economists I follow, we’re looking at economic growth over the next 12 to 24 months, so I’m very optimistic.”

He said dentists did a “phenomenal job” of bouncing back after the shutdown.

From a personal standpoint, he said when the pandemic hit, his company pivoted and ceased activity outside of taking care of their clients and focused on helping the profession pro bono.

His company has provided advice on the best way to recover. And those recovery elements involved some new and some familiar issues.

The initial issue was trying to traverse the unfamiliar world of Small Business Administration Paycheck Protection Program loans that helped businesses stay afloat during the shutdown. That was followed by the daunting “scramble” for personal protective equipment and setting up infection control measures in the office.

And there was staffing and the associated problem of sustained stress.

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– Roger Levin



“We have a lot of burnt-out doctors and staff,” Dr. Levin said.

He said burn-out is different than just being fatigued.

If taking a week’s vacation will alleviate the problem, then you are dealing with fatigue, not burn-out, he said.

A remedy, he added, is to make sure to take care of yourself both physically – by getting enough sleep, eating right and exercising – and taking a mental break by focusing on things you like to do, in and out of the practice.

“If you hate second molar endo, then stop doing it,” Dr. Levin advised. “If you hate your weekends, then get a better hobby!”

Islam Naem, who runs the dental practice Floss & Co. in Chicago and is known to patients as “Dr. Izzy,” agrees that the stress among staff is a problem.



Islam Naem

“My biggest focus right now has been dealing with a (team) member who has a wife or a kid or an uncle who has gotten sick or has a cough and (then) they are off for two weeks,” Dr. Naem said, “And the effect of that is the person is stuck in the house not doing anything. It’s not a vacation, that’s depression; they’re not doing anything productive.”

That leads to his staff being overworked and stressed.

That kind of heightened effort running your business means more stress for the dentist.

“The unfortunate truth about dentistry is that we have a DDS but not an MBA,” Dr. Naem said. He said many smaller dental offices closed; his patient numbers increased.

The influx of more patients means he

struggles to meet the demand. He has turned to consulting companies for help with scheduling.

Dr. Naem added that he is trying to make changes to the work environment to relieve the stress.

“I’ve always been on the side of being proactive so that if it happens again, I’m ready for it,” Dr. Naem said of the pandemic.

For instance he said he is looking at the “pain points” in dental offices; his dream is to provide a nice spacious area for staff to congregate for lunch or a break.

“Maybe in 90% of dental offices the lunch area is a cramped small space. The only place you can go for a break is as big as your bathroom, and there are five people in there. I don’t see that as a place to relax and take that rest you need to give it your all,” Dr. Naem said.

Dr. Levin said the pandemic has forced dentists to start thinking more about the business side of their practice.

“Dentists need to start to run real businesses,” Dr. Levin said. “When I came into dentistry in 2008, you didn’t have to run a great practice, have great systems, have great team members, and you could still do very well. It was a supply and demand issue. Our data shows 91% of practices grew every year.”

But now dentists need to focus on business practices, including installing a system that details step-by-step methods in conjunction with ongoing staff training to create peak performance by the team.

“The pandemic showed us we can’t do things the same way and come out successful,” Dr. Levin said.

One of those changes is to have enough cash on hand for emergencies. His firm recommends having four months of operating money at the ready.

Another area is PPE; he said a rule of thumb is to keep about three times the

amount that you need in case another emergency hits.

"It's not very expensive to protect your future at this point," he added.

Dr. Naem said he was quick to realize that he needed to make physical changes to his office to increase infection control so he spent time and money to upgrade his facility.

The time to look beyond immediate changes and look at long-term needs is now, according to Dr. Levin.

"We actually think 2022 will be a record year for many practices measured by production if the economy continues to remain at these excellent levels," Dr. Levin said.

But those spikes in patient appointments due to pandemic-related increases should not be part of a practice's business model, he warned.

Priya Tirumalasetty, who owns the Setty Dental Group in downtown Chicago, said she quickly recognized that the nature of the virus spreading by aerosol meant the dental profession would be affected.

She has two part-time associate dentists working with her and decided in early February 2020 to start installing a more robust air filtration system because of concerns about the virus.

"My associate was kind of chuckling at me asking if I was really concerned about the virus," Dr. Tirumalasetty remembered. "I said, 'Yes, I'm really worried about it because this is not going to be OK for our profession.'" She turned out to be correct.

The pandemic's impact also hit her patient base. Her office has yet to recover the patient flow she had pre-pandemic.

Dr. Tirumalasetty's office is across the street from the Willis Tower near Union Station; it's only a short walk for train commuters or those working in nearby buildings.

With the shutdown last spring, Metra saw a 90% drop in ridership as many



Priya Tirumalasetty

employees worked from home. While Metra is reporting more riders and more offices are re-opening, Dr. Tirumalasetty said many patients have not returned.

She said many of her commuter patients now working at home would not travel to the city just for a dental visit.

"I've heard the suburban offices are booming. . . it seems like patients are now just going to the dentist where they live," Dr. Tirumalasetty said.

And it's not just commuter patients she is losing.

"There has been a small migration of people who were living in the city who are now moving to the suburbs, kind of an opposite of what we saw 10 to 15 years ago when people were moving into the city," she noted.

That combination has meant a slowdown in her dental business.

"We have some diehard patients who felt that they needed to make the commute to come back. I was very touched that they would do that," she said.

Her practice has bounced back to about 75% to 80% from pre-pandemic levels, she said.

"I'm hopeful," said Dr. Tirumalasetty, who is looking to hire a hygienist. "Hygiene is getting strong again. If you would have asked me three months ago, I would have said we're having a tough time."

She said organized dentistry was "pivotal" in helping her get through those tough times.

"All of the updates, all of the information, everything was a phenomenal help," Dr. Tirumalasetty said. "The support that organized dentistry gave to the dental community in general was overwhelming. I think it was incredible; they really came through. I'm grateful, I really am grateful." ■

Joseph DeRosier is the CDS staff writer.

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