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In scary times it is best to be proactive to reassure your patients

THE LIFESTYLE CHANGES CREATED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ARE UNPRECEDENTED, UNPREDICTABLE AND EXTREME. We are unlikely (knock on wood) to experience such levels of unrest again.

But most every dentist should expect a health crisis of some kind to affect their practice of dentistry during their careers. 2015 CDS president Susan Becker Doroshov wrote in the *CDS Review* about a resurgence of measles in 2015; *CDS Review* staff reported on another resurgence of measles in 2019. Before that there was the zika virus, swine flu, bird flu, and every few years whooping cough spreads through one of our local high schools.

When these health threats arise, your patients will call; some will question your sterilization practices, while others will cancel their appointments altogether. Your best response is to take all their questions seriously and respond in kind.

Even better, proactively communicating with patients during an event that affects your practice of dentistry eases their nerves and solidifies their faith in the care you provide. Be honest, share personal information, and offer your help in other ways.

Being honest is not always easy, but in this case, it is the best policy. And it's always okay to tell people, "I don't know the answer, but I will work to find out for you."

In a case of COVID-19, it is certainly acceptable to tell patients via email that you temporarily closed the office and that while you have every intention of reopening to care for them, you could not yet say what date that will be. Statements like, "Expect a call from our front office staff to reschedule your appointment as soon as we safely can," remind patients that you remain concerned about all aspects of their physical health.

Assuage patients' fears. Recount your office's efforts to main-

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tain a clean environment and limit the transmission of germs 365 days a year. Remind patients that all instruments used in their mouths are heat-sterilized and stored in airtight plastic pouches until a member of your dental team - wearing a fresh set of disposable gloves – needs the instruments. List a few of the single-use products your patients see and tell how they are disposed of responsibly as the patient leaves the office.

And explain how you wipe down the dental chair, lights, mirrors, hoses and operatory countertops several times daily, between each and every patient who receives care.

If your team wears disposable gowns, face shields or side shields on their eyeglasses, tell patients the purpose they serve. Share with patients a short list of your most trusted sources for current information on best practices in the dental office. Offer to answer the questions patients still have about your protocols.

Close by reminding patients of all the things you will do during an uncertain time. Offer phone numbers and email ad-

resses for patients to contact their dental team in cases of a health emergency and commit to checking your messages with some frequency. Remind patients of the good health practices they should maintain during an extended period between appointments: replacing toothbrushes frequently, healthy snack choices, ample hydration to avoid dry mouth, and good flossing techniques.

It seems like a lot of information to share with patients if you feel the threat of infection is low, but the transparency you demonstrate when tensions are high instills lasting confidence in your work.

Also, the strategies listed here are not carved in stone. How to deal with reopening, plus addressing safety measures for you, staff and patients, are just two of the many practice issues you will face in the future. That's why regularly accessing information from organized dentistry, ADA, ISDS and CDS, on these and other issues is the smart practice management routine. ■

The views expressed in this column are those of the writer and not necessarily the opinions of the Chicago Dental Society. CDS presents Practice Smarts, a column addressing practice management issues dentists and staff members experience in the office. Practice Smarts is prepared by Joanna Brown, a freelance journalist. Email suggestions for topics to be covered to joanna@tjbrown.com.

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