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British survey shows patients ‘comfortable’ with teledentistry

IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN A YEAR SINCE ILLINOIS GOV. J.B. PRITZKER FIRST SIGNED AN EXECUTIVE ORDER MANDATING THAT HEALTH INSURERS COVER THE COST OF IN-NETWORK TELEHEALTH SERVICES. Many dentists acted quickly to incorporate video chats, secure documents sharing and phone consultations into their regular practice of dentistry.

Measures of COVID-19 positivity in Illinois have risen and fallen and risen again. And Gov. Pritzker has reissued several successive 30-day extensions for telehealth services.

And then came the signal that telehealth is here to stay.

The Illinois legislature took up in its Spring session HB 3498, which aims to make COVID-19-related expansion of telehealth services permanent through state statute.

As reported by *Capitol News Illinois* April 23, State Rep. Deb Conroy (D-46th), who introduced the bill, explained, “Allowing patients to receive health care services through telehealth, whether it be in their home or another safe and convenient location, reduces and eliminates barriers that worsen health care disparities.”

The bill is supported by the Coalition to Protect Telehealth, which names 35 health care providers, institutions and advocacy groups among its members. The list includes AARP Illinois, the American Academy of Pediatrics Illinois Chapter, the Healthcare Council of Illinois, Illinois Health and Hospital Association, Illinois State Medical Society, and the Southern Illinois University System.

Legislators’ enthusiasm for telehealth is matched by patients’ satisfaction. Dentists who have used telehealth in the last year should pause to evaluate how it has improved their practice of dentistry, and what opportunities there are for improvement.

An August 2020 survey of 2,800 dental providers in 20 states by the CareQuest Institute for Oral Health found that 23% of providers are seeing some patients via virtual platforms; another 11% of providers who are not using telehealth plan to do so in the near future.

No one has suggested that teledentistry can replace the in-person care delivered to patients of record on a regular basis. But even the skeptics – and there are plenty of vocal skeptics on the Internet – acknowledge some successful applications of teledentistry to complement and enhance the traditional, hands-on delivery of oral health care to a live patient in a dental office.

Many tout its usefulness in triaging emergencies, or conducting New Patient Visits for the purpose of taking a health history and obtaining consent. Doctors might also use teledentistry to facilitate a referral, or to provide oral health instruction.

Prior to the pandemic, the military had long used teledentistry when a limited number of doctors were available in combat situations. Other applications of teledentistry have extended to nursing homes, school-based oral health programs, rural communities and other vulnerable populations around the world.

One small study of teledentistry during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that regular patients are pleased with their dentists’ efforts to make teledentistry work under these most unusual circumstances. A survey of 52 patients, ages 8 to 88, found that 97% of patients felt satisfied with their virtual clinic experience and were willing to use the virtual clinic again for consultations or follow-up appointments. In comparison, 94% felt the same about the telephone clinic experience; they said face-to-face interaction would have improved their telephone-based teledentistry experience.

Greater discussion of these survey results can be found in the Aug. 14 issue of the *British Dental Journal*. But most interesting was the benefits of teledentistry that these British patients described. Foremost was the comfort they felt being in their own homes during their oral health consultation; they reportedly felt better able to absorb information, especially those patients who had dental anxiety. ■

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.