

SCAM ALERT: Be wary of unsolicited help

by Joanna Brown

THE ONLY PART OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THAT EXPERTS AGREE ON is that the base of knowledge is changing with every blink of your eye. Americans have been challenged to keep up and constantly alter their best practices to avoid falling ill.

Healthcare providers are under immense pressure to stay current in their knowledge of infection control practices that will keep themselves, their dental teams and their patients safe. Simultaneously, there are business matters that require immediate attention.

The best advice is to remain a hyper-vigilant consumer of information, no matter the source or the subject.

Professional associations, alumni clubs, industry publications, insurers, manufacturers, social media and other web sites will all offer advice. Take in as much as you like, but with at least a grain of salt – if not a whole heap.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

“If you are searching the Internet, look for information that is not attached to companies that are putting out and framing the information to sell a line of products. Look for objective reporting,” said Ted Borris, who practiced dentistry for 30 years before he became the CDS Director of Scientific Programs in 2014. “The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is a leader in that, as is the Mayo Clinic – they have a dental facility, and to say that they are on top of things is an understatement.”

CDS maintains a list of current information from reputable sources at www.cds.org/news/covid-19-updates. The American Dental Association has centralized its collection of information related to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis at www.ada.org/virus. This includes a page dedicated to FAQ, a list of resources, a live chat button for

quick responses to pressing questions, and a schedule of webinars.

Dr. Borris recommends seeking out information that comes from people you have learned from in the past and respect. Keep the source of that person’s recommendations in mind as you read or listen to the discussion; be prepared to separate the knowledge you gain from the products a sponsor might be selling.

“It all goes back to being a hypervigilant consumer of information,” Dr. Borris said. “It happens all the time that someone will take a course they really liked and then go out and share with their buddies something great that they learned in the course.”

But that can quickly turn into a game of telephone, as the message gets distorted or shared out of context.

“As a dentist, make sure you are listening to a trusted colleague – a mentor, or someone that you refer your patients to – if you’re not going directly to the source,” Dr. Borris said.

“There’s going to be a lot of hearsay on this. You might hear someone say something like, ‘oh, this coronavirus is just like Hepatitis B and we did just fine.’ That’s wrong. Hepatitis and AIDS are blood-borne pathogens, and we did a lot of work in the past to reimagine how we controlled blood in the office.

“But this is an aerosolized virus; COVID-19 spreads in droplets of water and so the way we practice dentistry – and even the spray that comes off your drill, for example – has to be considered in a whole new way.”

ANYTHING BUT BUSINESS AS USUAL

The same hypervigilance should be applied to the business of dentistry.

Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul offers advice to avoid being the victim of deceptive business practices at www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov.

Additional support is available from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) at www.ftc.gov/coronavirus. If you think you have been victimized already, both sites offer ways to report deceptive business practices.

“We know without a doubt that scammers will try to steal money and information from hard-working Illinoisans who are suffering under the COVID-19 pandemic,” Raoul said April 10 in a prepared release. “As much as it disappoints me that there is a need to continue warning people of scams being perpetrated by individuals trying to take advantage of the crisis, I want our residents to know the hallmarks of a scam so that they can avoid them.”

Among his advice, do not respond to email messages and text messages that claim to include information about the COVID-19 economic stimulus package and request personal information or prompt recipients to click on a link. Such messages likely are sent by scammers trying to steal personal information such as bank account numbers, Social Security numbers or credit card numbers.

Clicking links or opening attachments included in such messages also could result in people inadvertently downloading dangerous malware onto their computers or phones, which compromises the security of everything stored on those devices.

The FTC further advises business owners to be suspicious of unsolicited phone calls from people claiming to be from a financial institution or government agency. Do not engage in conversation; rather, end the call and initiate a new call using a phone number from your own records that you know is credible.

“Make sure, too, that you are buying supplies from a reputable place. We’ve been hearing a lot about counterfeit goods since the very beginning,” Dr. Borris said. ■