

Measures undertaken by the dental profession have aided post-COVID-19 recovery

Align Technology, Inc. have published the results of a new survey revealing the measures taken and challenges faced by the dental profession in the UK during and following the COVID-19 lockdown.

According to the report, drawn together from a number of independent sources by Align Technology, the dental profession has risen to the challenge of treating patients throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased safety measures and a rise in virtual consultations compared with pre-COVID-19 times.

The report also finds that closing practices again during a potential second wave in the autumn could be detrimental to patient health. In a survey of dentists, therapists, hygienists and nurses working for the 600 mydentist group practices, 96% stated that lockdown has had an adverse impact on the nation's oral health and that greater access to affordable dental care is needed. Eighty-eight percent of dental health experts surveyed said that the UK's dental health could decline because a lack of routine appointments could lead to preventable dental issues getting worse (research conducted by mydentist amongst 600 dental practices).

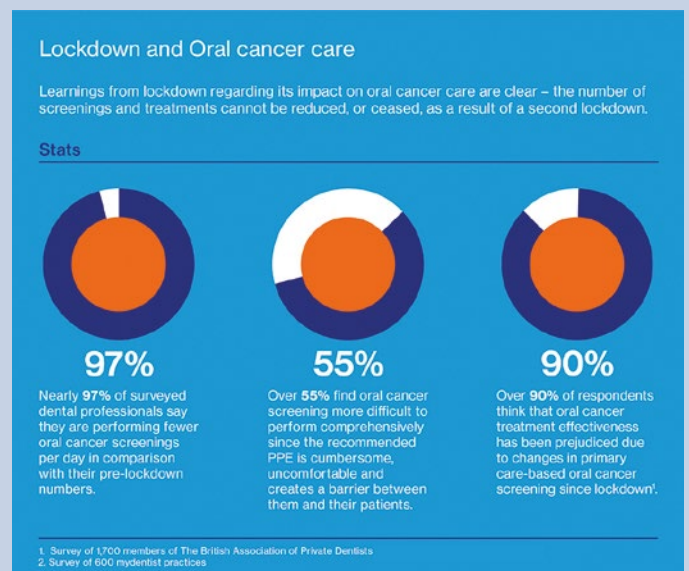
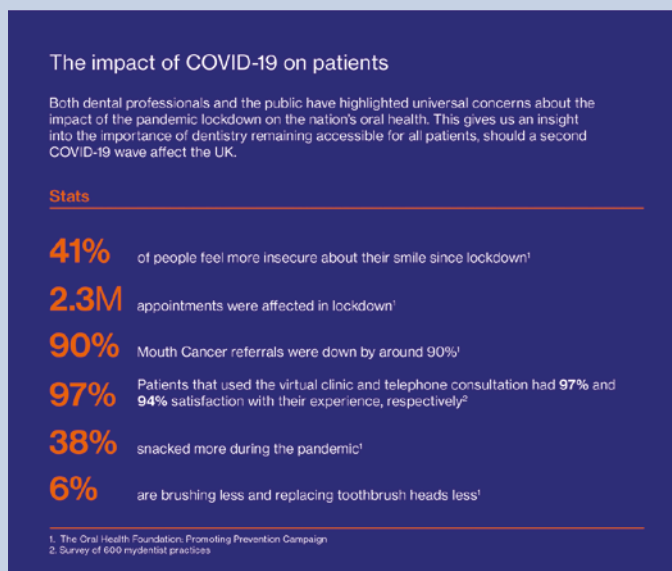
Those mydentist professionals surveyed suggested that there were missed opportunities to identify oral cancer which may cause significant long-term health issues. Over three quarters (77%) of those questioned are especially worried that oral cancers will be missed, and not referred onwards. One thousand seven hundred members of the British Association of Private Dentists concur: nearly 97% of those surveyed are performing fewer oral cancer screens per day in comparison to their situation pre-lockdown. Oral cancer specialist Professor Mike Lewis reported that where he normally receives 100 oral cancer referrals, over the same period of time, he received only

three. Professor Lewis notes this underlines the need to ensure that patients have regular access to dental practices.

Over a quarter (41%) of dentists believe it will take between a year and 18 months for the UK's oral health to return to 'normal' after the COVID-19 crisis. The probable rise in the need for implants was a concern that was specifically raised. Dr Guy Laffan, a dentist practising in Wales, advised that he personally extracted ten patients' teeth post lockdown, and felt these could have been saved if his practice had remained open and treatment was accessible. While London based, Dr Gina Vega added that 35-40 of her patients had root canal issues during lockdown. Around half did not meet the criteria to be seen by the dental hubs and some had teeth extracted as a result. Dr Vega expects a surge in the number of implants conducted over the coming months.

Many positive findings also emerged (from mydentist's research amongst 600 dental practices). The report suggests those patients who have been able to connect with a dentist virtually during the lockdown period had a positive experience. Patients who used a virtual clinic or telephone consultation had 97% and 94% satisfaction with their experience, respectively. This suggests a future for the use of telehealth in dentistry as an aid for recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

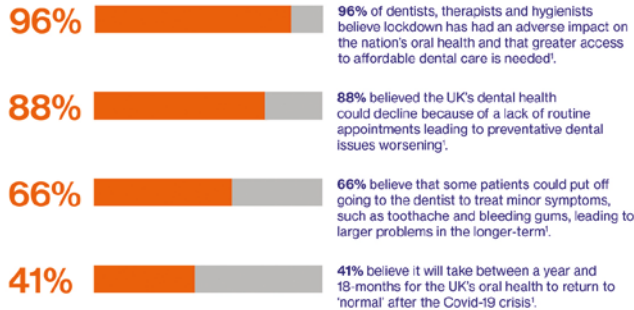
All dentists questioned agreed or strongly agreed that a teledentistry system would be very useful in saving time. Dr Ben Atkins, president of the Oral Health Foundation, suggests teledentistry has improved the patient experience, with the use of virtual clinics and telephone



Patient care in a post-COVID world

As a result of the national lockdown, dental professionals expressed their concerns and highlighted challenges surrounding patient care. If dentistry faces closure during a second lockdown, it is apparent that the nation's oral health could be negatively impacted well beyond the 'new normal'.

Stats



1. Survey of 600 mydentist practices
2. British Orthodontic Society news release, 6th June 2020

consultations. Dr Atkins recommends that dentists consider increasing their teledentistry offering to help reduce the risk of viral transmission and compliance with social distancing measures.

Adult orthodontics has also been identified as an opportunity for growth for practices post lockdown. Over three quarters (80%) of orthodontists in a new survey saw an increase in adult patients, and over half (60%) say this is due to heightened awareness of adult orthodontics. More than 15% of orthodontists say their adult patients are influenced by celebrities and bloggers. The majority of adult patients (85%) are in the 26–55 age bracket and female (80%).

According to Dr Mark Cronshaw, President of the Pandora Group [an independent think tank], the dental profession has led the way for stringent safety measures. While protective masks, gloves and clothing have always been the gold standard for patient and doctor protection, during lockdown, this lobbying organisation created a recommended 8-step protocol for reopening safely. This included evidence-based advice about the length of fallow time, air sterilisation, aerosol generating procedures (AGPs), rubber dam, PPE (levels of) suction technologies, and patient pre-treatment checks.

The protocol aims to reduce the risks associated with AGPs down to around 0.1% risk, and cumulatively reduce the overall risk and impact on the provision of general dental practice. Additionally, while dentists have been advised that they should have a month's worth of PPE in reserve in case of a second wave, no dentists questioned reported concerns about access to PPE, underlining how the profession's forward planning measures are already in place.

Align Technology has committed \$1 million to the Align Foundation to source and supply personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical supply donations as well as making cash donations to the World Health Organisation in Europe. It is also using its 3D printing technology and manufacturing expertise to produce face shields and medical swaps to support the fight against COVID-19. In addition, the company is supporting campaigns to help dentists and dentistry through sharing best practice, cooperating with leading associations, providing practical support for organisations and developing technologies to support the profession, including introducing virtual solutions to connect doctors and patients.

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