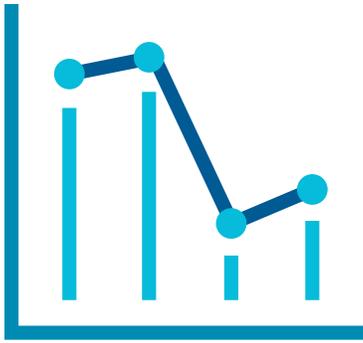


RESHAPING DENTISTRY IN TURBULENT TIMES

The COVID-19 Pandemic Demonstrates the Need for
Innovation by Dental Providers

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The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted the dental care industry. Although most dental practices have reopened for comprehensive care, significant financial challenges remain.

Patient volumes have fallen and operating costs have risen as dental offices comply with new infection control practices. Ongoing surges of the virus demonstrate that dentistry will face a turbulent environment for the foreseeable future. The pandemic has highlighted the flaws of the traditional fee-for-service reimbursement system that drives a care model predicated on surgical interventions. Amid this uncertain time, more providers say they are exploring or open to the use of innovative approaches to deliver care more safely.

A recent survey by the DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement reveals the growing willingness of dental providers who serve low-income and vulnerable populations to employ vehicles such as [telehealth](#) and alternate payment models (APMs) to reach more patients, strengthen the safety of care, and enhance their financial sustainability.

OPEN TO NEW APPROACHES

To enhance dental access and their economic stability, providers appear increasingly receptive to innovations in how care is delivered and how payment practices can offer incentives for better patient outcomes.

The DentaQuest Partnership conducted surveys of thousands of dental providers in June and August of this year. In June, most dental offices offered only urgent and nonelective services. In the June survey, 72% of dental providers said they expected long-term changes in the number of patients they see on a typical day. In the August survey, most providers said the maximum number of patients they are able to see on a typical day is at least one-third below the number seen before COVID-19.

Although more than 90% of dental providers reported being open and offering routine inpatient care by August, pandemic-related protocols have led to a sustained decline in patient volumes and limited providers' ability to attract new patients. In June, about [90% of dental providers](#) said their patient volume was reduced on average by half. While dental offices have experienced a partial rebound, the August survey found that only [35% of dental providers](#) are experiencing normal or near normal revenue levels.

To enhance dental access and their economic stability, providers appear increasingly receptive to innovations in how care is delivered and how payment practices can offer incentives for better patient outcomes.

[Back in June](#), 27% of providers were seeing patients through telehealth, and 13% planned to do so in the near future. The August survey shows many providers [continue to use telehealth](#) to connect with patients. In addition, recent survey findings revealed broad interest among providers in APMs that offer incentives for [value-based care](#), which focuses on keeping patients healthy by preventing or managing oral disease.

MODES OF TELEHEALTH



A synchronous visit

is a "live" two-way interaction between a dental provider and a patient or caregiver.



An asynchronous visit

occurs when photographs, X-rays or other recorded health information is sent via a secure electronic system to a dental provider, who later reviews this information to evaluate a patient's condition and/or update their treatment plan without real-time interaction.

EMBRACING TELEHEALTH

The need to identify alternative ways for patients to receive dental services has been prompted by social distancing guidelines as well as the pre-COVID-19 challenge presented by millions of Americans who live far from the nearest dental office. Telehealth can be used to enhance access and a dental office's financial sustainability through synchronous or asynchronous means. Shifting some patients to asynchronous visits may open up associated staff and chair time for other patients.

The most recent DentaQuest Partnership survey showed that most offices had reopened by August and that nearly a quarter (23%) of dental providers are seeing some patients via telehealth platforms. This is similar to the share of providers who reported using telehealth in [the DentaQuest Partnership's June survey](#). Moreover, the new August survey shows that 11% of providers who are not using telehealth plan to do so in the near future.

The August survey also revealed that a wide range of services are being offered through telehealth, including the prescribing of antibiotics or medication for oral pain, triaging patients to prioritize care, and facilitating a referral.

Providers who expected long-term changes in dentistry because of COVID-19, such as with infection control or patient volume, are more than [twice as likely to use telehealth](#) as those not anticipating these changes.



86% of patients said they were satisfied with their teledentistry experience



86% would recommend teledentistry to another person

For providers, teledentistry can minimize the gap between normal patient volumes and those experienced as the COVID-19 pandemic endures.

TELEDENTISTRY'S UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Growth in the [use of teledentistry](#) benefits patients and providers and it has been a helpful tool for dental providers to adapt to their uncertain environments. Telehealth has the potential to save money by offering patient referrals or providing other services that reduce the likelihood that patients will seek more expensive care in a setting such as a hospital emergency department. Accordingly, this can enhance chair capacity to care for additional patients or existing patients with more critical needs.

Telehealth benefits both patients and providers. For patients, technology-enabled care improves access and enables people more vulnerable to COVID-19 to receive care without leaving home. In a recent [survey of Oregon patients](#), 86% were satisfied with their teledentistry experience, and the same percentage said they would recommend this modality to other patients. This suggests that most dental patients will welcome the opportunity to get services through technology-enabled means.

For providers, teledentistry can minimize the gap between normal patient volumes and those experienced as the COVID-19 pandemic endures. When asked in the August survey when they expect the virus to be brought under control, 25% of providers said they expect control either in two years or more, are unsure, never expect control to be achieved, or expect it only after a vaccine is available. In addition, teledentistry can open the door to serving new patients, more efficient and safe triage of patient needs, and the potential for a new revenue stream.

Telehealth has the potential to provide added revenue while maintaining dental care access for existing patients and reaching new populations. Dentistry can do much more to tap the long-term potential of telehealth to enhance financial sustainability.

- Providers can offer more preventive services through teledentistry. The most recent DentaQuest Partnership survey showed that providers were less likely to use telehealth to deliver preventive services than they were for diagnostic and prescription services.
- Providers can make broader use of telehealth modes beyond telephone calls, which are the most common mode currently used. This audio-only modality is less likely to enhance the impact or financial sustainability of

dentistry because telephone calls are not reimbursed as frequently as other forms of telehealth and an audio-only mode cannot be used to prescribe pain medication.

- Providers can work through their professional associations to encourage policymakers in their states to [create a legal landscape](#) that is friendly to teledentistry. Patient privacy mandates, a lack of clarity about data security, and inconsistencies in reimbursement rates are among the potential barriers that need to be resolved.



51% of dental providers had never heard of APMs in dentistry



Dental providers who use telehealth are **45%** more familiar with APMs and are more interested in learning about them

RETHINKING DENTAL CARE FINANCING

By aligning payment with desired patient outcomes, APMs offer a financially sustainable way for dental providers to advance value-based care that focuses more on prevention and leverages telehealth. By 2017, 16 states had some portion of their Medicaid enrollees participating in an APM. Growing evidence shows the positive impact of [value-based care](#), and APMs are a tool that aligns compensation for providers with patient outcomes or performance measures. APMs also offer incentives for non-contact and minimally invasive dentistry.

Adoption of APMs requires raising providers' knowledge. The DentaQuest Partnership's August survey shows that roughly half (51%) of providers had never heard of APMs in dentistry. This survey reveals that dental providers who use telehealth are 45% more familiar with APMs and are more interested in learning about them. The turbulence resulting from COVID-19 has strengthened providers' interest in APMs. In fact, providers are much more likely to say their interest in APMs has increased (26%) during the pandemic than to say their interest has fallen (3%). In addition, those who are more knowledgeable about APMs are more likely to say they would consider participating in an APM.

APMs should be designed in a way that provides incentives to providers to use telehealth as one way to provide patient-centered, quality dental services. A recent [white paper](#) commissioned by the DentaQuest Partnership describes how FQHCs should explore APMs to increase integration of dental and medical care, improve health outcomes, reduce costs, and diversify revenue streams.

A FRAMEWORK FOR NEXT STEPS

The Three Domains envision a new model of dentistry, a roadmap for future care that will be cost-effective, efficient, and more equitable.

COVID-19 has exacerbated persistent disparities in health outcomes and social risk factors at a time when health agencies anticipate lower revenues. This new environment challenges health professionals and stakeholders to reconsider how the oral health care system is designed and how the business operations of dental offices are conducted. Dentistry is changing rapidly amid the pandemic, revealing new opportunities for transforming and strengthening the oral health care system.

The DentaQuest Partnership has outlined a [Three Domain Framework](#) that harnesses these opportunities. This framework can advance patient and provider well-being, while reducing the cost burdens associated with poor quality of life due to oral disease. The Three Domains envision a new model of dentistry, a roadmap for future care that will be cost-effective, efficient, and more equitable:

Domain One: Tele-Prevention



This domain builds the capacity to provide evidence-based virtual care to complement inpatient care. Using telehealth modes enables dentistry to engage in patient education and deliver other services that enhance disease prevention and advance the vision of whole-person health — meaning a health system that helps people achieve good health by addressing their physical, social and economic needs. Telehealth can be better utilized to advance prevention. As continued growth in telehealth use is projected in dentistry, permanent policy changes are vital to allow for widespread reimbursement of preventive services, minimally invasive care, and care coordination as well as use of telehealth by the dental team.

Domain Two: Minimally Invasive Care



The second domain focuses on minimally invasive care that reverses or slows the early stages of oral disease by using a program of anticipatory guidance and collaborative decision-making with patients.

Domain Three: Integrated and Personalized Care



This domain introduces personalized oral health care that prolongs the life of hard and soft tissues through risk stratification, medical-dental integration, the utilization of predictive analytics, and safe, individualized surgical intervention.

Domains One and Two form a primary and secondary care structure in dental operations to prevent disease or halt its progression. This provides a streamlined approach to the integrated and personalized care model of Domain Three. The development of primary and secondary care structures within dental operations is a divergence from the “drill and fill” process. The domain approach creates a process similar to that of primary care for dental care delivery.



Dental providers and health systems must reach consensus on the outcomes worth measuring and build the information technology infrastructure to measure these performance outcomes.

These domains reinforce connections between social and structural determinants of health, while promoting new opportunities to demonstrate value-based solutions that connect care providers, communities, and individuals.

A variety of steps are needed to lead dentistry to a system of care that reflects the Three Domains approach:

- **Raising awareness:** Greater awareness can spur providers' interest in value-based payment models. Experts have identified a [lack of awareness](#) among providers as a barrier to APMs. The DentaQuest Partnership has a variety of resources about value-based care and payment reform, including online [learning modules](#) and a [readiness assessment](#) to prepare for a change in payment structure.
- **Changing the policy and IT landscape:** An optimal policy and IT environment will help telehealth, value-based strategies and payment reform gain traction — each of which is a crucial element for advancing the Three Domains vision. Dental providers and health systems must reach consensus on the outcomes worth measuring and build the information technology infrastructure to measure these performance outcomes. State policymakers should be urged to rectify laws, rules or regulations that inhibit APMs or other catalysts for value-based care.

The road ahead is uncertain and will test the resilience of dental providers. Many of them do not expect COVID-19 to be brought under control any time soon. Providers cannot make practice decisions based on the precarious hope that things will somehow “return to normal.” In addition, normalcy could prove elusive because many Americans are likely to lose their dental insurance during the pandemic-related economic fallout.

For these reasons, the DentaQuest Partnership is taking serious steps to support providers, patients, payors, and other key stakeholders to change the way care is delivered using the domain framework. As these efforts progress in the coming years, data collection and analysis will inform a stepwise implementation of this approach.

The DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement is a nonprofit organization working to transform the broken health care system and enable better health through oral health. Through strategic grantmaking, research and care improvement initiatives, we drive meaningful change at the local, state and national levels. The DentaQuest Partnership is affiliated with DentaQuest, a leading U.S. oral health enterprise with a mission to improve the oral health of all.

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