



A Post COVID-19 Analysis: How to Restore Dental Operations Safely and Effectively



The Shape of All Payments

A Post COVID-19 Analysis: How to Restore Dental Operations Safely and Effectively

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Few things change the world quite like a pandemic. COVID-19 has dramatically altered the way we live, work, and socialize since its appearance on the global stage in early 2020, shutting down countries, businesses, and industries.

The healthcare industry, in particular, has been significantly affected, requiring vast modifications to existing business and operational models to reduce unnecessary contact at every point of care coupled with heightened patient expectations for safety and efficiency.

Healthcare penetrated the core of public consciousness as hospitals and practices across all specialties played important but distinctly different roles in helping to halt the spread of the virus. While hospitals experienced greater admissions and scaled back or eliminated elective procedures to accommodate the surge in COVID patients,

dental practices were advised by the Centers for Disease Control and the American Dental Association (ADA) to reduce in-office patient visits and postpone elective procedures, affecting patient care, practice operations, and the ability to collect on patient visits. As practices rebound from these trying times, it will be with a new focus on patient and staff safety, having learned valuable lessons of how to operate better and more efficiently in the aftermath of COVID-19, particularly in regard to payment and collections, patient registration, and the waiting room.

Old Payment Processes No Longer Suffice

Payment practices have come to the forefront as a result of COVID-19 in the context of the overall experience at the dentist's office. Healthcare practices have long struggled with modernizing their payment practices in line with other industries. Patients have come to expect the payment choices at their provider's office to mirror the breadth of payment options they regularly utilize across both brick-and-mortar and online retail outlets, such as Amazon®, Uber® and GrubHub®.

One survey found that more than 61% of consumers would consider switching healthcare providers for a better payment experience¹.

In addition to patient convenience, the current healthcare environment makes it an operational imperative that payment processes serve to advance the safety of patients and staff. Contactless payment methods – from card-on-file to recurring payments to Apple Pay®, Google Pay®, and Samsung Pay™ – that eliminate transfer of cards from patient to front desk staff and contact with payment terminals must be embraced by dental practices nationwide and available to patients when practices start seeing them again.

Increased availability of payment options is one function patients will be demanding; another is digital billing.

A 2018 poll of patients showed that 50% of patients with a bad billing experience don't pay their bills².

This is compounded by the fact that many patients now bear the brunt of most of their dental expenses resulting in a significant increase in out-of-pocket costs. Therefore, they are scrutinizing their spending more closely and looking for a provider who is transparent about cost of services and billing, and also offers convenient, easy, mobile bill payment as well as flexible and affordable payment plans.

Dental practices will need to pay attention to this patient-payment dynamic, and take a look at where they can improve their own processes to not only provide a better and safer patient experience, but also to eliminate redundancies in manual functions, additional costs associated with paper billing, and a needlessly long revenue cycle.

The Waiting Room: A Notion of the Past

In addition to billing and payment practices, another area to focus on is the waiting room. Even in the best of times, no one likes waiting, least of all patients who may be feeling anxious about seeing their dentist. In current times, this sentiment is only exacerbated by the threat of COVID-19 being passed on from contact with other people, objects, or surfaces. As with advanced payment options, any actions taken to ensure less time and front-desk contact in the waiting room will reassure patients. Many professional associations, like the ADA, are encouraging providers to examine patient flow first for maximum benefit to patient safety.

Multiple processes take place at the front desk, namely, check-in, insurance validation, HIPAA signatures, health history completion, and payment. Leveraging technology that allows patients to spend less time in the office checking in, completing registration forms, submitting proof of insurance and identification, paying for services, and checking out will help to move patients in and out of your office more quickly and reduce unnecessary risks. According to Rectangle Health medical advisor, Nirman Tulsyan, M.D., the concept of the waiting room has changed post COVID-19 with the

advent of technology that enables remote pre-registration on any personal device. Practices that wish to remain viable need to invest in onboarding technology that is efficient and contactless, putting patient registration in the hands of the patient.

With payment and registration transformed into a value-based digital experience, it will also be important that your front desk has texting capabilities that allow patients to wait in the comfort of their own car or outside the building until the dentist is ready to see them. This is especially critical for vulnerable patients who cannot run the risk of spending any more time than minimally necessary for an exam in the dentist's office. The traditional waiting room now serves as the passageway that leads the patient straight to the examination room.

Restoring Practice Operations for Safety and Efficiency: Contactless Solutions

Providers have a difficult journey ahead of them. They are tasked with creating safer environments for their staff and patients while also trying to rebound financially and recover lost revenue from the slowdown in operations.

According to a Student Loan Planner community survey of over 500 dentists, 81% had experienced a severe income loss from the onset of the pandemic through April 17th of this year³.

As the world reopens for business, dental practices must be ready to accommodate a full schedule of patients and prepared to meet the requirements of a new healthcare landscape, regulations, and patient expectations. Patients who have had their annual and routine visits pushed to the backburner these past few months will be looking for appointments. Administrators will need to find new ways to deal with the increased patient and practice workload while ensuring the safety of both their staff and patients. This requires taking stock of every area of the practice to identify where patient-to-patient and patient-to-staff interactions can be minimized. In the era of social distancing, every touchpoint where contact can be reduced is worthy of careful consideration. An examination of operational processes should reveal key areas where personal safety and business functions intersect, such as waiting rooms, patient registration and check-in, payment, and collections.

Technology that enables more routine administrative functions to be performed remotely and minimizes face-to-face contact should be explored. The right technology can help to advance patient safety by reducing in-person interactions between staff and patients, eliminating the risks posed by shared contact with office registration and payment terminal equipment, and enabling remote and touchless billing, payment, and insurance validation.

There is no time quite like the present to improve your operations with digital tools, in fact, the current climate requires it. In a recent healthcare survey by Accenture, half of all respondents expect their healthcare

practitioner to have digital capabilities, and **70% would be more likely to choose a provider that offers text reminders**⁴. Importantly, first impressions matter; a bad digital experience could sway up to **50% of patients to go elsewhere**⁵. This demonstrates the need to have a sound IT infrastructure in place to meet patients' needs for safety and control as providers increasingly rely on virtual communication, registration, and payment tools to ensure a smooth patient experience and collect monies due.

It can be overwhelming to know where to start. Look for a technology provider who can help you reduce administrative time and costs and create a more contactless experience that improves office flow and puts patients' minds at ease. You will want to carefully evaluate and make changes to the areas with the greatest influence and financial impact on your overall operations: payment, patient registration, and collections.

Payment Solutions

When dentists are looking to recover lost revenue and get back to business sooner, it starts and ends with effective payment processing. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, up to **95% of patients** will never fulfill their financial responsibility⁶, mainly due to offices' perpetuation of and reliance on outdated and costly, labor-intensive billing practices.

Doctors spend on average roughly six hours a day on paperwork⁷, including billing, plus carry the costs for an additional 4.3 staff hours per doctor to handle billing paperwork.

Your first investment in reinventing your practice operations should start here.

Look for a platform that maximizes patient payments upfront and can seamlessly integrate into your existing systems to improve workflow while enhancing safety for staff and patients. Contactless, web-based, and mobile payments are now of utmost importance to patients. You'll want to look for a HIPAA and PCI-DSS-compliant platform that reduces physical contact and allows your practice to:

- **Text patients** to let them know when the doctor is ready to see them
- Utilize the latest payment technology including **contactless capabilities** with Apple Pay, Google Pay, and Samsung Pay, eliminating the need for credit cards to exchange hands
- **Capture digital signatures** for patient forms and email receipts
- Safely store **encrypted payment information** for future use
- Offer flexible payment plans and **automatic** or **recurring payments** over time so that no patient needs to delay treatment due to financial concerns

Patient Registration Solutions

Once you have the right payment technology in place, the next place to look is your patient registration process. The right registration tool can help you grow revenue by increasing point-of-care collections and identifying gaps in care that lead to additional patient visits. Additionally, organizations that leverage electronic pre-registration can expect to:

- Receive a complete, **digital profile of the patient's registration** and insurance information prior to arrival
- **Cut patient registration time by at least 50%**, reducing the average time spent on completing forms from sixteen to eight minutes
- Increase quality patient encounters by **approximately 30%**

Look for a platform that creates a remote, digital experience and puts your patient in control of the process, assuring them that their safety is your primary concern. Ensure that you have a registration process that:

- Allows the patient to register on their **own device** before they arrive at your office, eliminating high-risk content with bulky registration devices, clipboards, and pens
- Enables the patient to **pay online prior to their appointment** with the option to register a card-on-file for recurring payments
- Captures insurance information that can be **pre-validated by the office**

Accounts Receivable and Collections

Patients don't want medical bills piling up in their mailboxes, and dental practices should be seeking ways to meet this expectation, while also looking at collections as an area for increased cost savings.

Practices on average spend up to \$9 per patient per visit in time, postage, and supplies.

In a technologically enabled world this seems less than efficient. Collecting outstanding balances is the final leg of the payment process and one where you can make a positive impact on your revenue stream by reducing the revenue lifecycle and getting paid faster. Make it easy for your staff to bill and patients to pay by employing technology that can accept online and mobile payments.

Dental practices that wish to remain viable now and well into the future will need to act with urgency to restore operations in ways that increase efficiency while enhancing safety and providing patients with a value-based model of care. The quickest and smartest way to do this is by adopting and leveraging technology that provides a better patient experience, meets the new social-distancing requirements, eliminates time in the waiting room, and helps you get paid faster. The enhanced measures, revised protocols, and advanced technology that you implement now to reassure patient safety will serve to position you as the preferred provider of choice for many patients in the months and years ahead, re-instilling trust and building loyalty in the post COVID-19 era.

Rectangle Health

Rectangle Health designs consumer-centric solutions to grow provider organization revenue and improve patient outcomes through workflow optimization and enhancement of the patient experience. Rectangle Health's payment and registration technology empowers patients and providers with digital pre-arrival document completion and payment options. Our products can reduce wait times, improve front desk and staff efficiency, and enable your organization to collect more payments.



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