

Fighting the COVID-19 challenge—Public health dentist's perspective

Dear Editor,

Dentists worldwide are exercising caution and limiting their practice to keep the transmission of the coronavirus at bay. This letter is an insight into the possible contributions of a Public Health Dentist to the present pandemic.

There is a general consensus amongst members of the dental fraternity on the need to triage patients and accept only emergencies for clinical management. Hence, present day scenario demands more than ever that people be educated on the importance of oral health. Programs to create awareness amongst students, teachers, communities can be conducted virtually. Short films with relevant information can be circulated on television.

We can identify scientific literature that is credible^[1] and translate it to comprehensible layman terms which can be made accessible to common man. We can also create an organized source of peer reviewed scientific literature for the dental fraternity.^[2] In times of infodemics, this can be a significant contribution.

Tele dentistry can also be used in assessment of patients. However, expecting all the patients to have access to the internet may also be unrealistic. Ensuring safety of patients personal space and information is critical when virtual platform is being used.^[3]

While emergency care is being provided by dentists, subjecting our vulnerable population (elderly above 60 years and children below 10 years) who seek such emergency care to dental visits carries its own risks. The mobile dental van may be used as means to reach such populations. The van may be thereafter disinfected following prescribed protocol.

The lockdown that India witnessed, cut access of people to cigarette and other tobacco products. One to one personalized tobacco counseling may have taken a back seat, but it is our moral duty to follow up and support patients as they go into a forced action phase. A dedicated helpline number should be advertised and made available to all such patients seeking care. Time is of essence to influence policy makers and stakeholders to redesign and enforce strict implementation of legislation regarding production, usage, consumption, and public spitting of tobacco products.

While dental students continue classes through the virtual medium, efforts can be made to help students appreciate

concepts of disease transmission, pandemic, and to appreciate the public health efforts taken worldwide to combat the pandemic. Didactic classes can be helpful.^[4]

It may be early to conclusively state that oral health symptoms could be early indicators of COVID-19; however, dentists can associate symptoms of dry mouth and amblygeusia with other symptoms and a COVID history to identify possible suspects.^[5] Possibility of saliva as a diagnostic aid and presence of viral binding sites in the oral cavity should also be researched.

Finally, dentists can support the frontline medical teams by contribute to pre-screening and triaging of patients, recording case history, management of infection control in hospital facilities, post discharge counseling, etc.

Conclusions

Public health dentist can contribute significantly to combating this pandemic. We only need to explore and innovate.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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