

Surviving the pandemic: Dental students co-learning together to provide patient care

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1 | PROBLEM

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged dental schools to continue providing patient care and clinical learning experiences for students. Additional infection prevention and control measures were implemented, including the use of high-volume evacuation for aerosol generating procedures.¹ With a limited number of registered dental assistants and automated suction devices, it became obvious that additional chairside assistance would be essential for our students to provide patient care and obtain sufficient clinical experiences.

2 | SOLUTION

To solve this problem, first- and second-year dental students were assigned as “clinical co-learners” to assist the third- and fourth-year students chairside with patient care from September 2020 to July 2021. Each first- and second-year student was assigned two or three clinical co-learning sessions per week. Pre-COVID, junior students were only scheduled three or four sessions per academic year to shadow senior students on the clinic floor and did not have the opportunity to assist chairside. Prior to the first co-learning session, all students were required to complete an online training module regarding Infection Prevention Control and the first- and second-year students received a half-day hands-on chairside assisting training session. Senior students received instruction on how to welcome and communicate with the junior students. The junior students were asked to complete a “co-learning reflection

form” (Figure 1) to record and reflect on their co-learning experiences.

3 | RESULTS

Sixty-four junior and 87 senior students co-learned together for approximately 50 clinics each, with 545 reflection forms being submitted. Initial feedback from the reflection forms, course evaluations, and class representatives has been positive. First-year co-learners reported becoming familiar with the clinical setting in a nonthreatening and low-stress role, communicating with patients, and using patient management software. They also reported observing “real-life” patient situations that they were simultaneously learning about in simulation and classroom settings. Second-year co-learners were able to perform some procedures on the senior students’ patients that they had previously been trained to complete earlier in the program. Examples of these procedures included local anesthesia administration, rubber dam application, scaling, and pit and fissure sealing. The senior students appreciated the assistance not only with the high-volume evacuation and other assisting tasks but also with operatory set up and clean up, data entry, and taking radiographs. The partnership provided earlier opportunities for students between different years of the program to collaborate and for clinical support staff and instructors to interact with the junior students.

The unanticipated “silver linings” of this pandemic survival plan have been so positive that we are planning to incorporate co-learning experiences into our DDS program

Co-Learner Experience Form

1. Date of clinic:

2. Please select the discipline you acted as a co-learner today:

- A) Comprehensive Care
- B) Diagnosis
- C) Restorative
- D) Periodontology
- E) Removable Prosthodontics
- F) Fixed Prosthodontics
- G) Endodontics
- H) Oral Surgery
- I) Pediatric Dentistry
- J) Other - please give details

3. Exam/Procedure you observed:

4. Exam/Procedure you performed:

5. Operator Name

6. Operator's year of study:

- A) 4th year dental student
- B) 3rd year dental student
- C) Other- please give details

7. Co-learner's reflection: What did you learn from this experience?

FIGURE 1 Co-learning experienceform

long term. To enhance co-learning in the future, junior students will be able to request which disciplines and procedures they are assigned to. Due to the amount of time spent co-learning and the richness of the student reflections, chairside co-learning will also be included in clinical course outlines and contribute to student course grades.

REFERENCE

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How to cite this article: Senior A, Lai H, Lunardon D, Patterson S. Surviving the pandemic: Dental students co-learning together to provide patient care. *J Dent Educ*. 2022;86(Suppl. 1):845–846. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jdd.12777>