

Cross Sectional Questionnaire-Based Internet Study: Approach of Patients to Dental and Oral Healthcare Amid Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Aim: The aim of this study is to analyze the mindset of patients and their response towards emergency and routine dental and oral healthcare during and post covid-19 pandemic.

Material and methods: This study utilized an online questionnaire in order to collect and interpret the responses. The questionnaire was made accessible to participants through multiple online platforms. The participants voluntarily answered questions referring to emergency and routine dental care amid the Covid -19 pandemic.

Results: A total of 330 responses were received from participants out of which 177 were females and 153 were males. 85% of participants were likely to visit a dental

setting for emergency procedures. 56 % of participants would not be visiting a dental setting for routine procedures and another 29 % were least likely to visit. None of the participants would definitely visit a dental clinic for routine dental procedures in view of Covid-19 pandemic. 91% of participants were comfortable with paying extra charges for more safer dental procedures.

Conclusion: Covid-19 outbreak has sprung alarm bells in the realm of dental profession. Patients have become apprehensive about visiting a dental setting fearing cross contamination and exposure to the infectious contagion. Dental professionals need to take the challenge on by utilizing online platforms for consultations and also educating their patients about Do's and Don'ts of Covid 19. Pre- appointment online consultation should be made a

pre-requisite. Moreover, all necessary infra-structural, clinical and armamentarium upgradation must be ensured for which majority of the patients agreed on sharing the financial burden.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, dentistry, dental and oral health care, dental setting, patient response

Introduction

Contagious viral diseases and dentistry have a long-drawn history in the annals of infectious epidemiological eras. The Corona Virus (COVID-19), being highly infectious, presents even a tougher challenge to dentistry. The coronavirus (COVID-19) has challenged health professions and systems and has evoked different speeds of reaction and types of response around the world. Dental setups across the globe have been affected by the pandemic. Consequently, dental and oral health care has been at receiving end of Covid- 19 sufferings. Dental and oral surgery procedures using drills or ultrasonic devices cause aerosol release, and routine dentistry has therefore been suspended in several countries, including the UK, to reduce virus transmission. In India too, Covid -19 has restricted dentistry to mostly to emergency procedures only. For many occupations, working from home is simply not feasible, including those who are on the front lines of the response and those who are on the lower end of the economic scale. Online consultations in dental profession constitute a miniscule of this clinic-based profession. Due to the characteristics of dental settings, the risk of cross infection may be high between dental practitioners and patients. Due to the highly infectious nature of the disease, the modes of transmission and infectivity are not fully understood. This is particularly the case as in dentistry the care provider has to operate in close proximity to the patient using droplet and aerosol generating procedures. Patients have become apprehensive about visiting dental hospitals and clinics

fearing an exposure to the contagion. This precarious scenario has two inevitable outcomes—deterioration in overall oral and dental health and financial implications on dental professionals. This article assesses the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on mindset of patients towards dental and oral health care including emergency and routine appointments.

Methodology

Study design: A specific and concise questionnaire was generated in jpeg format and was made available by the authors to their contacts through various online social media platforms. Both male and female participants above age of 18 years and those having availed dental treatment at least once before were included in the study.

Participants below 18 years of age, those who had no previous history of visit to a dentist and dental health professionals themselves were excluded from the study. Online responses from participants were obtained through a period of 4 weeks.

Sample size: 330 patients

Analysis And Results

A total of 330 responses were obtained from participants. The descriptive characteristics of participants are given in **Table 1**. It included 153 males and 177 females with a mean age of 41.6 years. A total of 128 students, 115 employees, 30 retired employees and 57 daily wagers recorded their responses. When the participants were enquired about their likely response to a dental emergency like severe pain in their tooth or gums, 44 % of participants would Definitely visit a dental setup, 41% of participants were likely to visit, 15 % of participants were Least likely to visit. Not a single participant opted for NOT visiting a dental setup in case of emergency. (**Table 2**)

Participants visiting a dental clinic for routine dental procedures presented a different picture. None of the

participants recorded “Definitely Visiting” option, 15% of participants are likely to visit, 29% are least likely to visit while as 56% would not visit a dental setup for routine procedures in view of covid-19 outbreak. (Table 3)

91% of participants were comfortable with paying extra charges for more safer dental procedures that included the dentist donning a disposable PPE. 5% participants did not agree with extra charges while 4% recorded a response of “NOT SURE”. (Table 4)

Table 1

PARTICIPANTS	
Male	153
Female	177
AGE GROUPS (years)	
18-38	153
39-59	140
60-80	37
OCCUPATION	
Students	128
Govt/private employees	115
Daily wagers	57
Retired employees	30

Table 2: Participants Visiting a Dental Setting for Emergency Procedure

Patient Response	No. Of Patients	Percentage
Definitely	145	44
Likely	135	41
Least Likely	50	15
Not At All	0	0

Table 3: Participants Visiting a Dental Setting for Routine Procedures

Patient Response	No. Of Patients	Percentage
Definitely	0	0
Likely	50	15
Least Likely	95	29
Not At All	185	56

Table 4: Participants Comfortable For Being Charged Extra For Safer Procedures

Patient Response	No. of Patients	Percentage
Yes	300	91
No	17	5
Not Sure	13	4

Discussion

To our knowledge, this study represents one of the first studies about patient perception towards visiting dental settings amid the Covid-19 outbreak. Although this kind of study comes with various limitations that will discussed below, we believe that our study will provide a firsthand account of eminent serious challenge posed by Covid-19 pandemic to dentistry. The Health ministry in India issued guidelines to dental settings asking to restrict the practice to tele dentistry, emergency procedures and deferring the routine dental procedures. In our study, 85 % patients were either least likely or not at all visiting a dental setting for routine procedures in the foreseeable future. Dental tourism accounted for about 10% of the total medical tourism and was projected to grow at 30% per annum. However, this scenario has changed dramatically today with the coronavirus pandemic. There is a serious and immediate need for government intervention to help support and stabilize the dental industry. Call it an urgent requirement of CPR for dentistry if you will. Dentistry is facing its darkest hour yet, with the growth and spread of the Coronavirus pandemic. Dental surgeons are at the highest risk of contracting and transmitting the Coronavirus, alongside paramedics, nurses, and other healthcare workers. Dental clinics across the country have been shut for over two months. With the pandemic still on the growth curve, there is no hope of revival anytime soon, compounded by zero earnings by dental practitioners and staff at clinics. An important aspect of our study focusses on additional expenses to dentists for improving the sterilization and disinfection standards as demanded by the current pandemic situation. This includes the cost of PPE, Goggles, face shields, improving ventilation systems etc. This inevitably will increase the financial burden. Dentists in private practice will need to buy PPE and disinfectants to protect patients, staff and

themselves from the coronavirus, increasing cost of providing dental care. However, an encouraging outcome from our study was that more than 90% of the respondents were comfortable with paying extra for more safer dental procedures. We believe that with more awareness about the new normal forced upon us by Corona virus, most of the patients will agree on sharing the financial burden of PPE's. The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented global public health crisis. Oral health professionals, dental associations and regulatory bodies are facing diverse challenges to continue providing dental care and promoting the oral health of the population, while at the same time protecting patients and practitioners from the health threat posed by SARS-CoV-2. It is important to make informed clinical decisions and educate the public to prevent panic while promoting the health and well-being of our patients during these challenging times. Dental education has assumed a more important role in view of Covid-19. Dentists should utilize pre-appointment tele dentistry to educate the patients so as to reduce the actual appointment time. COVID-19 is going to create a marked shift in dentistry because people will demand it. Patients will be scrutinizing their dentist office experience and expecting the highest level of safety, whereas previously, safety measures may have just been assumed. For those of us who have always aimed to be on the forefront of dentistry, especially as a component of overall health and wellness, this is game time. An internet-based study has its own standard limitations. Random selection of participants is not possible. Further this is a cross sectional study covering only a small region. The lockdown, however, left us with online option only. So, in order to get more broader perspective, a broad-based study with a larger sample is required.

Conclusion

Covid-19 outbreak has sprung alarm bells in the realm of dental profession. Patients have become apprehensive about visiting a dental setting fearing cross contamination and exposure to the infectious contagion. Dental professionals need to take the challenge on by utilizing online platforms for consultations and also educating their patients about Do's and Don'ts of Covid 19. Pre-appointment online consultation should be made a pre-requisite. Moreover, all necessary infra-structural, clinical and armamentarium upgradation must be ensured for which majority of the patients agreed on sharing the financial burden.

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BRITISH DENTAL JOURNAL VOLUME 197 NO. 3

AUGUST 14 2004

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