

“COVID - Role of a Public Health Dentist, Are We Doing Enough?”

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Opinion

Today the entire world has been engulfed in chaos by an entity known as “COVID”. This single disease has upended societies and dramatically altered everyday life across the globe. With the pandemic still on the rise and health personals going head on head with it, it still costed many lives with the mortality rate to be as high as 3.4% . With the widespread of the pandemic multiplying itself into several manifestations Even with the extreme efforts of health care personals there is little hope of revival anytime soon. The current scenario has compounded zero earnings in all sectors and even the profession of Dentistry is facing its darkest hour yet.

As Public Health dentists, we uphold the art of preventing and controlling dental diseases and promoting dental health through organized community efforts. We provide leadership and expertise in population-based dentistry, oral health surveillance, policy development, community-based disease prevention and health promotion, and the maintenance of the dental safety net rendering the golden phrase “Prevention is better than cure”.

The branch of Public Health Dentistry has been here since time immemorial with the earliest history dating to 3000 B.C. Public Health Dentists not only provide treatment but also focus on dental and oral health issues in communities and populations rather than individual patients. We not only have assessment skills but also have the right in policy making and expert advocacy. In spite of the manpower, human capital, and the uprising technology, it is an irony that our profession is quite saturated in this current scenario. Even with Dr. Guy Moorman in his podcast, stating “They never talk about the public-health dentist, and I think deep down inside, we're all a specialist, because at the end of the day we're all a public-health dentists”. We who represent the public health of the people at large services hold the key for developing awareness about the social aspects of the profession and the responsibility towards community. It is our solemn duty to uplift and strengthen this pool of research and information. Historic epidemiologists such as Sir William Budd and Sir John Snow have immensely contributed in the discovery of typhoid fever and cholera. COVID has changed everyone's way of living, taking us to our knees. The pandemic exposed significant gaps in this public health emergency declared by the WHO. As the mindset of the people has been bombarded with fear and anxiety of this entity, there is lack of awareness about the ongoing chaos. Many under-privileged population which lack in knowledge are being exposed to this entity. It is the immediate need to take this opportunity and assess the role of dental care professionals in a global public health emergency by coming to their aid in their creating awareness about COVID. By organizing awareness programs and educating the masses

so that they carry the word to each other and even guide others building the basis for dental health care. It is also our moral duty to act as “Behavioral providers” so as to counteract the pandemic related mental health implications on the population.

By the use of teledentistry establishment of channels of communication by its unique ability is very helpful. We should connect the disadvantaged, primarily rural communities and the homebound with dental providers which make the method particularly well-suited to address lack of access during and after the pandemic as they are critical in safety providers concerning patient. We should clearly communicate the importance of oral health to overall health, indicate the steps being taken to ensure patient and provider safety, and promote prevention and non aerosol procedures during dental emergencies. During this pandemic, triaging services are essentially important to sort patients likely to be infected with the pathogen of concern. The Dental Council of India recommends telephonically scheduling patients and triaging them according to their need of dental care. We should be able to screen and identify potential high-risk COVID patients to prevent the spread of the infectious disease. And also incorporating this knowledge to the students that would be beneficial for them to refer such a case and also will be able to prioritize dental treatment for their patients which is the need of the moment. Advocacy of the public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy needs to be undertaken. This will shift the temporary regulatory changes to permanent being implemented to address this immediate chaos to address disparities and inequities.

We Public Health Dentists should implement policy considerations, continued research, monitoring, and surveillance for this COVID. Ironically, in India out of 300 dental colleges with over 928 public health dentists, the rural PHCs in our country hardly have a few DPH professionals showing negligence and merely referring us as patient providers. History has shown how Public Health Dentists has led to revolutions such as during Global crisis in the 1980s, the oral health community actively responded to the HIV epidemic, Swine flu epidemic and the opioid crisis making us a frontline warrior. Looking at the brighter side, COVID is an opportunity to reform or make visible changes to the field of Public Health Dentistry rather than being isolated and separated from the mainstream healthcare. This COVID has clearly shown us that we are indeed a key integral part of this healthcare system and has unmasked an opening in the integration of oral health professionals into the public health system of India. Now is the time we Public Health Dentists need to support each other as a professional family appendaging in providing integrated healthcare to the people in this pandemic with “Health for All” being the beauty of our profession.

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