

Quick Poll Results: Patient hesitancy in returning to the dental office due to COVID-19 concerns

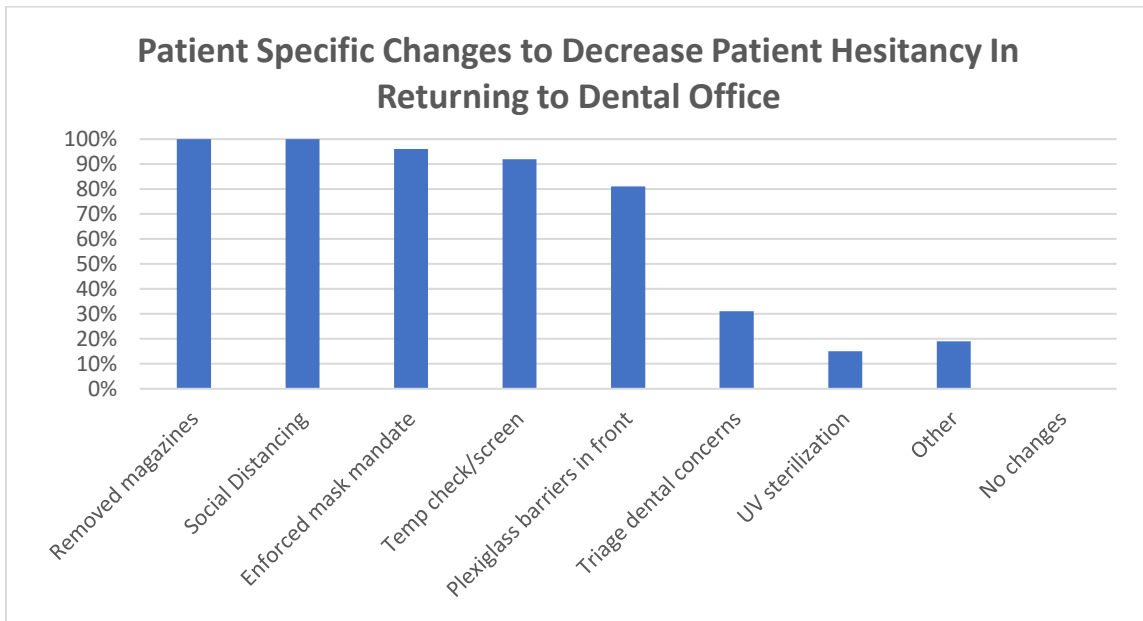
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Distributed through the South Texas Oral Health Network

Concerns due to COVID-19 have impacted patient hesitancy in seeking routine dental care. This Quick Poll identified ways COVID-19 concerns have created changes in dental practice volume/productivity, changed the way practices implement precautions/safety measures for both patient and personnel and how these changes, if any, were communicated to patients.

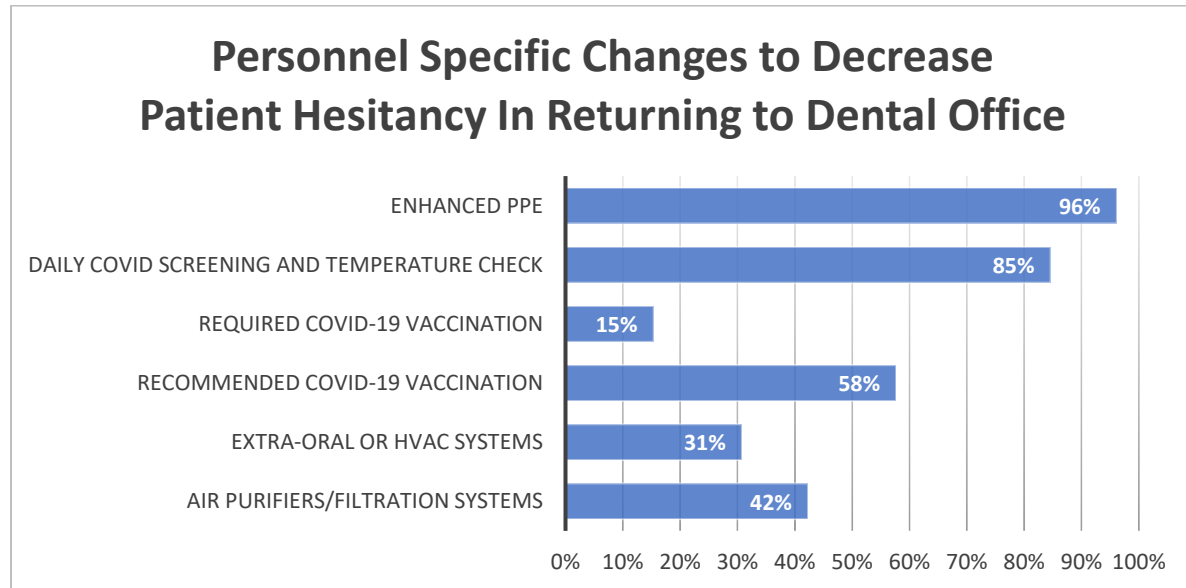
A total of 26 dental providers responded to this Quick Poll in May-June of 2021. Compared to this time period in 2019 (pre COVID-19), 46.2% of respondents reported a decrease in patient volume, 34.6% reported patient volume stayed the same and 19.2% reported an increase in their patient volume.

The surveyed dental practitioners all reported implementing at least two patient specific change to decrease hesitancy in returning to the dental office, with 100% of respondents both removing magazines and pamphlets from waiting areas and implementing social distancing protocols. In addition, 96.25% of respondents enforced mask mandates for all patients and 80.8% used plexiglass barriers in the front office area. Approximately 20% reported using other patient specific changes including fog disinfecting each operatory between patients, using HVAC isolation systems and increasing or staggering appointment times to minimize patient interactions.

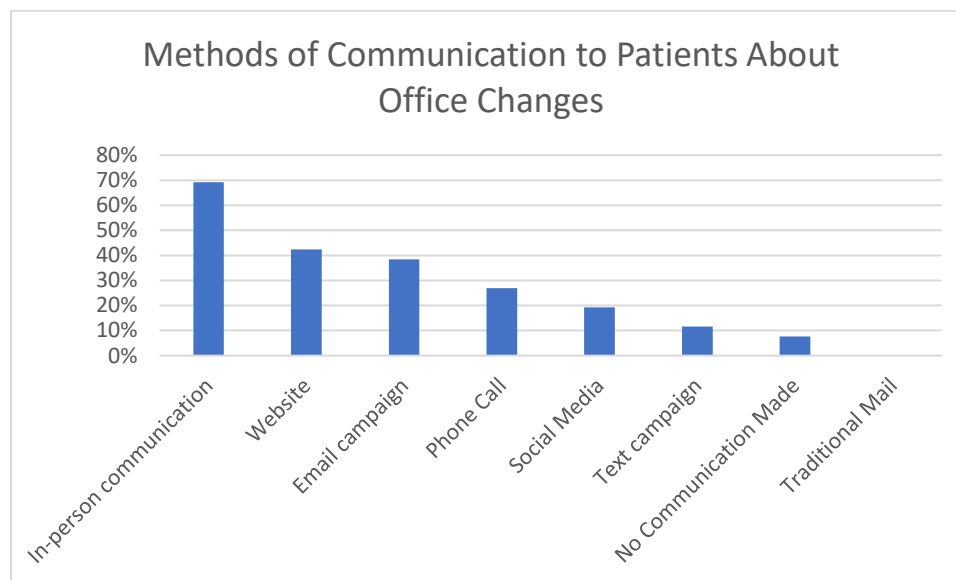


Providers reported more varied responses regarding personnel specific changes to decrease patient hesitancy. The most frequently reported changes were implementation of enhanced PPE for staff

(96.2%) and daily COVID screening and temperature checks (84.6%). A total of 73.1% of providers either recommended or required COVID-19 vaccinations for personnel.



Approximately 92% of those surveyed reported at least one form of communication was used to alert patients about changes that were being implemented to address COVID-19 concerns. Interestingly, no one polled reported using traditional mail as a communication method indicating a potential shift in communication preferences of both patients and practices.



Finally, providers were asked to share what patients had related that led to a decrease in their hesitancy to return to the dental office. Three main themes emerged which dictated increased patient confidence in returning to the dental office. First, patient responses indicated that hesitancy was decreased due to

the availability of vaccines and “public health notifications of lowered risk.” The second area of patient hesitancy was related to patient’s general anxiety and fear level. Patients were waiting to receive the vaccine before returning for appointments and expressed to their practitioners that they were “afraid of catching COVID at the dental office”, “want to wait until it’s over”, had “general fears being around other people”, and would call when they felt safe. Finally, patient trust and confidence in the dental office was the last area that decreased hesitancy in returning for routine dental care. Participants noted that patients noticed office changes in response to COVID-19 and felt reassured, even stating “your office is always so clean... so we trust you.” An office also informed patients that employees are tested and vaccinated. These comments show that changes may make an impact in decreasing patient hesitancy in returning to dental offices.

While COVID-19 concerns have impacted patient hesitancy in returning for routine dental care, providers have implemented targeted patient and personnel changes to alleviate these concerns. These changes combined with public health guidance and vaccine availability indicate a decrease in overall patient hesitancy in returning to the dental office and a likely return to pre-pandemic patient volume.