

COVID-19 Testing and Dentistry

Introduction

Access to dental care is already a challenge for many families as they face barriers with finances, language, transportation, scheduling, and associated fears and anxieties. Over the course of the last year, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has posed a new, and at times even bigger, threat to access to dental care. Many dental offices have closed, some are running at partial capacity, and some restrict treatment to emergency cases only. As children miss their preventative and restorative appointments, their disease state is progressing and posing a threat to their overall health and quality of life.

Issue

COVID-19 testing is within the scope of licensed dentists; dentists are expected to regularly monitor high blood pressure, smoking habits and blood sugar and A1c levels in certain offices. Currently, dentists are unable to provide many preventative and restorative treatments to patients, because most dental procedures including prophylactic cleanings, restorative fillings, and more create aerosols that can spread the novel coronavirus. If patients had easy access to COVID testing, and were able to test negative prior to their dental appointments, regular care could be continued and many dental infections and emergencies could be prevented. By safely administering COVID testing to patients, dentists can accelerate the delivery of oral health care that many children have been deprived of due to lack of available appointments and locations for COVID testing.

Importance

The aim of this policy brief is to advocate for dentists to safely administer COVID testing in dental offices in order to provide oral health care to children in a timely manner.

Impact

The provision of oral health care during the pandemic is very dangerous due to aerosols created during certain procedures and because many people may be asymptomatic but still carry the virus. The willingness of each patient to test before treatment will not only increase the quality of dental care, this will also allow public health officials to monitor new cases and allow dentists to provide safe dental care in a timely manner to ensure the well-being of children and their oral and overall health. By allowing dentists to administer COVID tests to their patients in-office, there will be a two-fold positive impact. Patients will receive timely dental care and preventative care can also resume, hopefully limiting the number of patients experiencing dental discomfort or infections and improving the oral health outcomes of pediatric dental patients. Additionally, an increased number of tests will allow public health officials to track and monitor more COVID cases in the community, hopefully limiting the spread of the disease and keeping the number of people affected at a minimum.

Recommendation

Our recommendation is that dentists be allowed to administer COVID-19 tests in office as a means to facilitate more timely and safe dental care during the pandemic we are facing. Dentists should be able to register with their local community's public health department and work alongside to improve testing and tracking efforts. The public health officials and dentists could work together to determine the number of testing kits needed weekly for dental patients in the office, and the dentist can provide the test results and contact-tracing information (gathered from motivational interviewing in-office) to the public health department so that both parties will reap the full benefits of this integrated effort. Dentists could undergo a training course on how to properly administer the tests, and how to communicate test results to their patients and health officials. If dentists do not need to involve a third-party testing center to facilitate the practice of safe dentistry, they may function more effectively and provide much better and safer treatment for their patients- improving the oral and overall health of the entire community.

Next steps include a pilot program including a 5-10 dentist who are willing and eager to administer COVID tests in their offices to work with local public health officials to obtain enough kits for a 3 week period to test all patients requiring aerosol-producing procedures that will be visiting their office. The dentists will undergo training from the appropriate organization prior to administration, as well as training for the appropriate questions to ask in order to monitor contact-tracing. All testing results and completed dental procedures should be recorded and at the

end of the trial period a meeting will be had to assess the overall impact in-office COVID testing by dentists had on the community in identifying and tracing COVID-positive patients, as well as the improvement in delivery of efficient and safe dental care. If the trial-period has positive outcomes, more dentists should be allowed to obtain testing kits and training so that the program can become widespread.