

HOW A PANDEMIC IS TRANSFORMING THE FACE OF DENTISTRY

One practice's success using teledentistry to deliver close-up care from a distance.

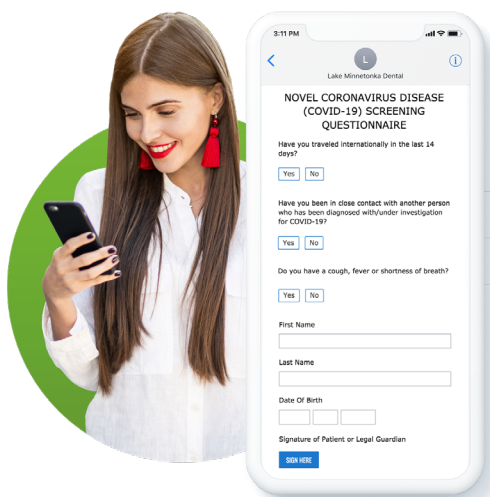


Michael Cruz and Dee Dee Meevasin, DMD, were running critical business operations at full sprint when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Las Vegas, threatening to stop them in their tracks. “We had just onboarded a new hygienist, as well as a new associate. They had only been with us a month prior to the shutdown. In addition, we had completed a merger with another practice that was supposed to move into our facility on April 20,” says Cruz.

Cruz is the office manager and self-described “zookeeper” for Dee for Dentist, a technology-forward dental practice in Las Vegas, Nevada. Meevasin, a 13-year practitioner and early adopter of many leading dental advancements, immediately found ways to remain operational when suddenly faced with taking emergency appointments only. “My first thought was how can I protect our team and their families, and how can we maintain the business of the practice?”

While businesses from coast to coast were caught off guard, Cruz explains it's a unique conundrum for offices like his. “A dental practice is different from most other businesses. Many businesses can continue to operate or adapt in some capacity and scrape by. Restaurants can serve takeout or deliver, retail can ship direct to consumer and service providers can come to you. In our world, with no patients coming in, income effectively shuts down with no other options.”





VIRTUAL EMERGENCY TRIAGE

Thanks to their enthusiasm for cutting-edge tech, when Nevada's governor announced the Shelter In Place order for the state, the pair immediately pivoted from routine operations to keeping emergency patients in Meevasin's chair and out of emergency rooms by channeling the power of teledentistry. "We've had OperaDDS for about six years and used it mostly on weekends for virtual consults, triaging — that kind of thing," says Meevasin, a Patterson customer.

Now, when patients call Dee for Dentist's emergency line, she sends them a form to instantly collect vital information ahead of time. "I'm using it as a screening tool to see if it's really an emergency. Without staff right now and very limited personal protective equipment, I need to make sure it's something I need to go in for and a lot of times, they're little things the patient has a question about or they need assurance on something and can wait until we reopen," she adds. "The great thing is, OperaDDS is pretty detailed. It will ask a lot of questions and has the patient upload several photos. It's basically like my assistant going in and asking all of these important questions before I come into the room and filling me in on the situation, so I can assess it."

Since the team's endodontist and oral surgeon are still operational, Meevasin says the tool makes it easy to provide help for patients with swelling, abscesses and those in need of root canals or extractions. "Our hospitals are so overworked and understaffed right now, we are doing whatever we can to try and keep our patients out of them. Especially with the dangers of COVID-19 going around, if you're sending patients to the hospital, you're risking them being exposed sitting in the waiting room so we're trying to limit that."

Cruz also points out dental patients who visit local emergency rooms often take up valuable bed time, only to be sent back to their treating dentist. "It's really just a wasted trip, as well as wasted time and money for the patient." On the other hand, he says treating emergent dental issues quickly during the pandemic is an essential service, one that helps our medical providers continue fighting the virus. "Two people who had true emergencies were frontliners — one was an emergency doctor and the other a police officer. We had to treat them right away so they could get back to work."

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— Michael Cruz, Office Manager

OPERATION CRITICAL

OperaDDS and other teledentistry platforms are a necessity today according to Cruz. He says they're also easy to adopt since they're intuitive and designed with all types of users in mind. "It's a no-brainer to get something like this for your practice. At first, we were thinking it was only going to be a couple of weeks we'd be out. But now that we're on the other side of two, possibly three, four months, something must be done, and this is one of those things you can do. It's built in a way that even if the practice isn't tech-savvy, if you know how to use the internet, you can log in and see everything. It's nice that it's organized and syncs with the practice management system in a HIPAA-compliant way that's all part of the patient record. As far as getting patients on board, they aren't even surprised it exists. They think it's just like everything else."

Cruz believes teledentistry platforms are superior to other models such as Zoom, FaceTime and Facebook Messenger. "Zoom is having security issues and it's a lot more complicated to use. You have to use your personal cell phone with FaceTime and not everyone has an iPhone. OperaDDS is hands-down better for a practice. We get the whole picture whereas a lot of times, when a patient texts you a photo, you're like 'I don't even know what I'm looking at'. They're

complaining of pain and they'll take a picture of that tooth but what we really want to see is the swelling. How does the face look? So, just getting the whole picture again helps us to know what we're going to be working with and, from the liability standpoint, we're protected because we've got a full diagnosis."



A TREND HERE TO STAY?

Meevasin points out that using a teledentistry-specific model is smart since practices won't have to change the platform when the currently relaxed HIPAA rules are reinstated. And it's an investment, she relates, that will benefit offices when they reopen and beyond. "Moving forward, you're still going to have people who are afraid to leave their homes. If they have a problem, they're going to want to make sure 100 percent they really do have a problem before they leave. This is a great screening tool to help patients and offices with those needs."

Cruz thinks the public will also become used to teledentistry because of the pandemic and clinically, dental offices will likely need to embrace the change — moving to operating more often within a virtual space. "Unfortunately, with what's happening now, a lot of practices are going to suffer and it's really those ones that can figure out how to stand out who will survive. This helps you stand out and it's going to cut back on labor costs and feel up to date from a marketing standpoint. For a small expense, you can make your investment back in terms of saving labor hours."

Cruz and Meevasin are anticipating a May date to welcome their freshly merged practice. Armed with teledentistry and other virtual methods of training staff and reaching patients, Cruz is confident they'll return to practice organized and ready to tread a path of unknown challenges ahead. "Coming back is going to take some time. We feel we have used this period wisely in planning and preparing for how to come out of this, but we also understand that we are coming back to a different world."

DIGITAL PLATFORMS BRING PATIENTS WITHIN REACH

Platforms that include teledentistry offer a wealth of other valuable features and benefits. "With OperaDDS, teledentistry is really a small subset of one aspect of the software. Implementing it helps your practice become almost paperless, fully compliant and protected from a liability standpoint. It can make you more efficient and give you a better overall experience with patients," says Cruz.

The OperaDDS digital platform includes:

PAPERLESS FORMS

Streamline intake, management and transmittal of sensitive information while removing the burden of paper forms.

CHAT

Swiftly and securely message any member of your team from any device, creating better case acceptance and patient experiences.

SECURE EMAIL

Avoid costly HIPAA violations through traditional options like Google and Yahoo mail by sending sensitive information through OperaDDS.

RECALL

Experience the satisfaction of a full schedule through an automated scheduling process. Reschedule appointments immediately with two-way texting and reduce scheduling gaps and no-shows.

AUTOMATED REVIEWS

Know and take control of your online reputation. Grow your practice with an intelligent system that pushes positive reviews to social media platforms while flagging issues to be addressed behind the scenes.

Explore the full OperaDDS software suite and request a demo.

www.pattersondental.com/cp/Software/Patient-Engagement/OperaDDS