

Impact of COVID-19 on Oral Healthcare

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Received: June 17, 2023 | **Published:** November 14, 2023

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Perspective

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in December 2019, has since wreaked havoc wherever it spread in every nook and corner of the globe. Its fallout has been catastrophic, especially in the health sector, including oral health. It has had impact both at the individual level, as well as the community level. At the individual level, patients seeking dental care have had their fair share of problems, largely stemming from disruption of oral health services.

In the context of individualized dental care, it is an established fact that dental operative procedures generate huge amounts of aerosols that can easily transmit viruses. There are many approaches that can be adopted to minimize the transmission of deadly respiratory viruses, including SARS-CoV-2. With reference to dental practice, there is a need to switch to safer non-aerosolizing preventive dental care, minimizing the need for surgical intervention. This will be a true paradigm shift from the way dental procedures are conducted today.

Coming to the effect of the pandemic at the community level, it has been devastating too. Oral health services have been an integral part of the ever-changing health scenario during the various stages of the pandemic. Dental care services were severely crippled in the initial lockdown period. The pandemic has affected various aspects of oral healthcare, at various levels, including a decline in oral health-seeking behavior, reduced access to oral health services, and complete shutdown of all oral health programs. Besides regular dental consultations, other important services like oral cancer screening and secondary dental care have also been severely affected. Now, even after recommencement of dental care services, these are progressing at a snail's pace.

We must not forget that deprived children and the elderly have been the hardest hit and have had to bear the brunt of the burden. On the other hand, the affluent have been hardly affected. This is a serious concern, as the vulnerable people from the economically weaker strata of society are deprived in more ways than one. This has increasingly widened the gap between the haves and have-nots. Therefore, it should be kept in mind that the benefits of dental healthcare services should percolate through all strata of society, ensuring that they especially reach the deprived and downtrodden who need them most and whose voices are often not heard. Additionally, ancillary services, such as fluoridation of community drinking water supplies and outreach programs for free dental check-ups for the deprived sections of society should also be in place.

It should be noted that the pandemic has not only affected patients and health services, but has also jeopardized the lives of countless doctors, nurses and other healthcare personnel. Given the fact that in the initial days of the pandemic, doctors and nurses didn't have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) – not even simple surgical masks – it was like going into battle without any armour. Needless to say, for this very reason, countless doctors and nurses lost their lives, which could have been easily prevented. Maintaining work-life balance, being stigmatized by society despite working selflessly, and coping with the psychological trauma of seeing so many deaths, are some other challenges experienced by them. In the dental profession, though the impact was lesser, it was still there, especially in the public sector dental hospitals.

The pandemic has taught us much about healthcare delivery, including dental care. Now that WHO has withdrawn its highest global alert, namely, the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), the acute phase of the pandemic is officially over. Hence, now is the time for introspection – where we succeeded, where we failed and what we could have done better to save more precious lives. At the same time, we should remember that it's still not the time to let our guards down. There is no room for complacency as there may still be a backlash.

As we slowly exit the pandemic, it is of paramount importance to chalk out a clear-cut plan of action to address the inequities in oral health services, as otherwise, we'll make the same mistakes that we made with the inequitable distribution of the COVID-19 vaccines, which has cost thousands of lives. These plans need to be implemented on a war-footing as dental health services have resumed and everyone everywhere, irrespective of race, cast, creed, colour, socio-economic status, and public standing should get access to the best dental care that the health system can offer. This action plan must be aligned with WHO's plans to include oral health within the purview of Universal Health Coverage (UHC), so that everyone can benefit from it.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of Interest

None.