

OPINION

## OPINION | THOMAS REDD: Dental visits remain crucial

**See you again in six months? Even during covid-19, most Arkansans are saying yes. (01.24.2021)**

by THOMAS REDD SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE | Today at 8:30 a.m.

When it comes to going to the dentist during the current pandemic, Arkansans don't seem to hesitate to open wide. Data gathered by Delta Dental of Arkansas, the state's largest dental insurance company, shows that over the seven-month period from June to December, preventive and diagnostic care procedures have been performed at just slightly below 2019 levels. The number of claims for routine visits such as cleanings, exams and X-rays fell about 5 percent from 2019 to the same period for 2020. These results echo recent findings of a nationwide Delta Dental Institute poll indicating 69 percent of Americans agree that the benefits of a routine dentist appointment outweigh the potential risk of delaying preventive care during the pandemic.

Kathleen Good Ederle, DDS PA, a general dentist in Little Rock and a Delta Dental network provider, elaborated on the importance of regular dental cleanings and screenings.

"There are a multitude of reasons to keep your routine appointments, but in my opinion the cancer screening is one of the most important services we perform," she said. "Since covid, I have found one squamous cell carcinoma on a patient's face and one cancer at the base of the tongue.

"Also, gingival problems from vaping are incredible in the young adults who are either trying to quit smoking or vaping singularly. As far as teeth go, decay continues to advance, abscesses develop, and during covid, I have found many teeth have been broken from clenching and grinding. I could go on and on."



What about the fear of coronavirus infections? Dentists across the state have taken a number of additional precautions for the safety and protection of both their patients and staff. They are following guidelines by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, including increased use of personal protective equipment, expanded sanitation and different check-in procedures.

Dr. Ederle detailed the extensive modifications she implemented in her practice. Some were permanent, such as the retrofitting of each treatment room with air pullers, which required new ductwork, electrical, venting and carpentry, she said. The solid doors to each treatment room were modified with glass panels and slide closures.

Other efforts are ongoing: Every chair, computer, and countertop is covered in plastic barriers of a multitude of sizes and shapes. The rooms are cleaned and mopped with medical-grade disinfectant and left vacant for 30 minutes before and after each patient visit. Staff members wear N95 masks, face shields, medical gowns, and two sets of gloves.

Check-in procedures have changed as well. Patients need to pass a pre-appointment screening questionnaire, then wait in their cars until the receptionist calls them in for their appointment.

Upon entry--masked, of course--they have their temperatures taken before entering the treatment room, where they are instructed to wash their hands for 20 seconds and rinse their mouths with a peroxide-based solution for one minute.

Dental clinics had to close temporarily in April and May due to covid-19. At the time, Delta Dental of Arkansas began offering what amounted to more than \$9 million in loans and grants to dentists to assist with staying afloat during the shutdown, reopening their practices and defraying costs incurred for the purchase of personal protection equipment.

"I appreciated the \$2,500 provided by Delta Dental," Dr. Ederle said, and listed how expenses for supplies, equipment and staff have increased dramatically. The cost for gloves has tripled; for hair covers it doubled.

In the spring, she spent at least two days scouring the country for disinfectant wipes and calling around for surgical masks. Online suppliers limit the quantities of supplies that may be ordered. An additional employee was hired to help with cleaning and patient screening, she said.

The pandemic has brought enormous costs on so many levels, but it offers a couple of silver linings. It is likely to prompt an expansion of traditional dental services. For example, dentists may become involved in administering covid-19 vaccines.

Meanwhile, Arkansans who have neglected a regular cleaning and checkup may want to make that appointment with their dentist now.

Dr. Thomas Redd is Vice President, Professional Relations, for Delta Dental of Arkansas.

# Dental visits remain crucial

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