## Helping Dental Providers Maintain Services and Contact with Patients During the time of COVID-19 Physical Distancing: March 23, 2020

## Prepared by

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## Background

During this time when there are shelter in place requirements and strict physical distancing, dental providers, practices, and clinics are facing significant challenges keeping in touch with their patients and providing basic advice, consultation, triage, and emergency services.  There is a critical need to provide systems and solutions to support both patients and providers in these difficult times.

One important consequence of physical distancing requirements, if patients are not able to maintain contact with their oral health care providers, patients may be going to already overburdened hospital emergency departments for dental problems.  It is clearly critical that this be avoided.

Dr. Paul Glassman, Associate Dean for Research and Community Engagement and his staff at the California Northstate University (CNU) College of Dental Medicine (CDM) have extensive experience supporting providers in using teledentistry to reach people who might otherwise not have access to care.  However, the way tele-dentistry has been used in these systems needs to be altered now.  They have prepared this guide for dental providers and practices to use in developing systems that can be effective in the current environment.

This document contains a description of a system that can be implemented quickly and can make a major difference in patient's ability to access their dental providers and dental providers ability to provide effective advice, consultation, and triage leading to efficient in-person urgent or emergency care when it is needed.

## System Considerations

The response to the current environment described here has two components. The first is guidelines about best practices for using teledentistry for consultation and triage, and protocols for efficient in person emergency services when those are required. The second is about selecting and deploying an effective teledentistry software platform that that can facilitate communications between providers and patients in the current environment.

## Guidelines, Training and Technical Assistance

### Existing Systems

Providers and practices can communicate and interact with patients at a distance in a variety of ways. At a basic level, they can make and return phone calls or combine that with review of cell phone photographs sent by email. While many practices may adopt these strategies, they have several disadvantages. The transmissions are not secure or private, although rules around these issues have been relaxed now. They also do not create a record of the interactions which is critical for treatment continuity and practice integrity. Finally, they do not facilitate minimum interventions should an in-person visit become necessary.

Dr. Glassman and staff at CNU, based on their experience deploying and supporting teledentisry-enabled care systems have developed this list of components of a system optimized for the current environment. Providers and practices may decide to adopt all of these components or may choose only some of them based on resources and capabilities.

### A System Optimized for the Current Environment

A system optimized for the current physical distancing environment where dental providers and practices are offering only emergency services could include the following strategies and components:

Notify People About the Availability of Oral Health Consultation and Care
- Patients are notified about the availability of dental consultation at a distance. Individual providers and practices can make their availability known by placing a message with a link on their web site, sending a letter or an email blast to their patients.
- Larger entities with networks of providers and patients can connect patients and providers, make software systems available to the provider, and support systems in other ways.

Practices and Providers Adopt the Following Strategies and Activities:
- Understand and implement best practices for synchronous and asynchronous communication with patients at a distance including advice, consultation, and triage.
- Plan for adoption of this teledentistry-based patient care and communication systems.

- Adopt workflows for using the system within the practice and provider environment. (See workflow example below)
- Use teledentistry systems to collect and analyze information provided by patients or collected during the synchronous and asynchronous distance interactions. Use the information to plan for and optimize conduct of in person emergency visits should those be necessary.  The goal is to have all information, explanations, consent, etc. taken care of prior to the patient arriving at the dental office for emergency treatment.
- Use protocols for conducting emergency treatment in order to minimize interventions needed, minimize the time in the office, and create very short appointments that can effectively deal with the patient's major concerns with minimum interventions.

## Workflow Optimized for the Current Physical Distancing Environment

The following is a set of steps that can be incorporated in a workflow in the current physical distancing environment.

- Practices and providers and larger entities let patients know how to connect with their provider or connect patients to a provider.
- Patients access a provider-configured portal and register.
- Patients access a scheduler and can schedule various types of consultations, e.g., request for written or chat response, real-time video consultation for new patient, existing patient, urgent or emergency problem, orthodontic or denture advice, etc.
- Appointment and response times and types are provider-configured and if possible, are integrated with the practice's dental practice management application.
- Providers can set fees by appointment type and collect coverage information or payment via credit card prior to the appointment.
- Upon booking the appointment, the patient is registered and has access to a secure patient portal for: uploading photographs or other information, re-scheduling or cancelling appointments, reviewing and downloading information posted by the provider, launching the videoconference, and receiving secure communications, including treatment-specific educational materials.
- Patients fill out and sign provider-defined online registration forms, e.g., demographic information, health history, insurance information, HIPAA consent form, etc. using customizable templates or other provider generated forms.
- Appointment confirmations are sent via text/email. Appointment reminders are sent via text/email.
- Providers can respond via written or chat through the patient portal or real-time videoconference.
- Referrals to other providers can be made and managed within the application.
- Patient records, including provider notes, treatment recommendations, any uploaded images and documents, a recording of the videoconference, are all easily available for export to the practice management application, if desired
- Access to the application for patients and providers is available via PC, Android and iOS mobile devices.

Training and Technical Assistance

CNU staff can provide additional training and technical support through live and recorded webinars and materials prepared for on-demand access through CNU's learning management system.

## Advantages

There are multiple advantages to implementing a system like the one described here. These include:

- **For patients**: This would provide easy access in the current environment for patients to contact their dental care provider or become connected with a dental care provider. It would also help direct patients with oral health concerns to oral health providers as opposed to the emergency room.
- **For oral health providers**: This would allow providers to remain in contact with their patients as well as other individuals who were not previously connected to dentists. It would help them provide advice, consultation and triage in a secure and private system that creates a record of the interaction which can be exported to their EDR and stored and shared with other referring providers. It would help them plan for any needed in-person emergency treatment and would allow all of the paperwork, signatures, explanations, and consent to be handled prior to the in-person visit. This would greatly streamline and minimize the time required during an in-person visit and minimize risk to the patient and provider personnel.
- **For the Health Care System**: This would help people receive dental advice, consultation, and even needed in-person emergency care for dental conditions and concerns. This is important to keep people with dental problems and concerns from using other components of the health care system to address these concerns. Particularly important in this area is eliminating the use of the hospital emergency department for dental conditions.

## Options for Implementation

Dental systems and providers can take advantage of systems described here in various ways.

- Individual providers can purchase an individual license to teledentistry sytems and develop their own processes for its use.
- Individual providers can purchase an individual license to teledentistry sytems and contract individually for implementation training and technical support.
- Larger entities can negotiate for discounted group licenses for teledentistry sytems which include support for training and technical assistance. These entities can set up information flows and systems to connect patients to their own providers or to connect patients who do not have a current provider to a participating provider.
- This latter option would lower the overall cost, streamline implementation, and be the most effective way to ensure widespread adoption.