

RESEARCH REPORT

# Public Health Dental Providers Embrace COVID-19 Related Changes:

**These providers are faster to anticipate and adjust to changes  
amid the pandemic**

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## Authors

### **Abigail Kelly, MS**

Biostatistician, Analytics and Evaluation  
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

### **Madhuli Thakkar Samtani, BDS, MPH**

Biostatistician, Analytics and Evaluation  
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

### **Eric P. Tranby, PhD**

Data and Impact Manager, Analytics and Evaluation  
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

### **Julie Frantsve-Hawley, PhD, CAE**

Director, Analytics and Evaluation  
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

## Acknowledgments:

### **Matt Jacob, BA**

Scientific Writer and Communication Consultant  
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

### **Caroline McLeod, RDH, MS**

Value-Based Solutions Manager  
CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

### **Da-Nell Pedersen, MPA**

Director, Clinical Programs  
Arizona Alliance for Community Health Centers

### **Stefanie Pagliuca, BA**

Director, Workforce Development & Recruitment  
Bi-State Primary Care Association

## Methods:

The DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement conducted this electronic survey from August 13 to September 1 by sending an emailed invitation and link to a list of 21,617 DentaQuest-enrolled dental providers in more than 20 states. Up to three reminders were sent to prompt completion. Respondents were only asked to complete the entire survey if they indicated having a high degree of familiarity with their dental office's patient volume, staffing, dental insurance carriers, treatment protocols, and the office's pre- and post-COVID finances. A total of 2,767 dental providers partially or fully completed the survey, for a response rate of 13%, and 2,299 passed the screening questions. PHDPs were identified through a question asking about the type of dental practice where they are employed.



# Introduction

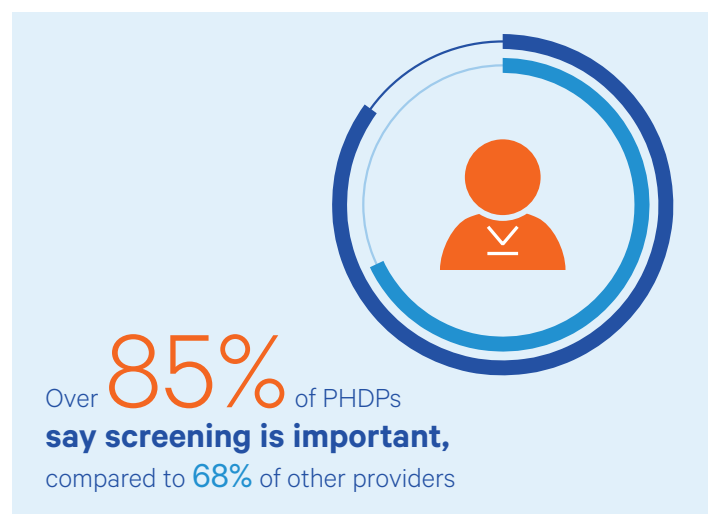
The SARS-CoV-2 virus has severely disrupted the dental care industry across the nation. Dental providers, including those in public health settings, are preparing for long-term changes they expect beyond the pandemic.

A new survey by the DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement in August 2020 reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has spurred greater awareness and concerns among dental providers who work in federally qualified health centers (FQHCs) and other public health settings. Nine percent of all the providers (N=199) surveyed work in FQHCs (n=149) or other public health settings (n=50), including school-based dental clinics, local/county/state health department clinics and other dental safety net clinics. Overall, results did not differ by types of public health settings. Responding dental providers come from a variety of states, including Illinois (15% of responding providers), New York (12%), Florida (12%), Texas (9%), and Colorado (6%).

The survey's key findings about all public health dental providers (PHDPs) revealed:

- Screening patients and staff for COVID-19 risk factors is more of a priority for PHDPs than for providers in other types of settings. Over 85% of PHDPs say screening is important, compared to 68% of other providers.

- More than 90% of PHDPs think it is important to secure and properly use PPE and to clean and disinfect dental operatories, while only three-quarters of providers in other types of practices view these tasks as important.



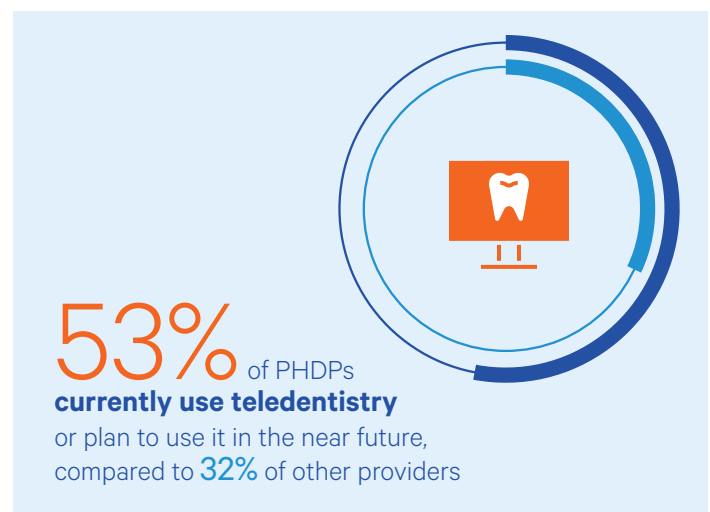
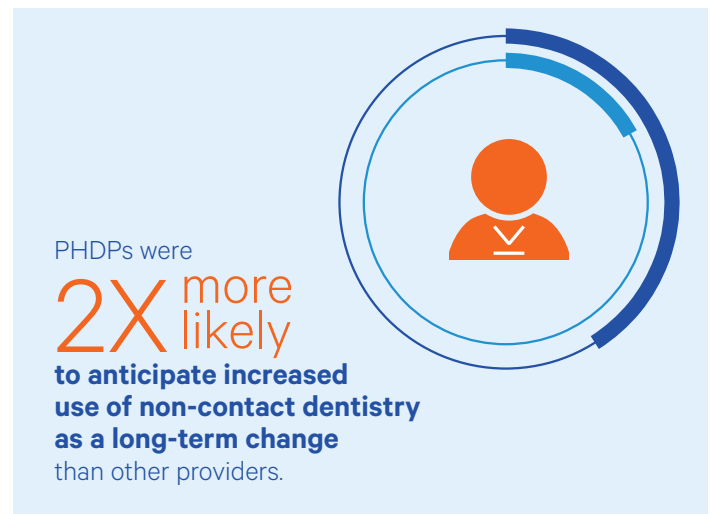
- Between 60% and 70% of PHDPs anticipated long-term changes in how front desk and clinical staff work, including changes in:
  - Infection control procedures
  - The types of dental procedures conducted or the way they are conducted
  - The number of patients seen in a typical day
  - The ongoing attention to occupational hazards and an increased use of minimally invasive and/or limited aerosol-generating procedures
    - Less than half of providers in other practice settings expected to experience these long-term changes.

Although PHDPs did not specify the reasons for placing greater importance on these pandemic-related tasks, one factor could be that these providers disproportionately serve people of color — a population that has [suffered disproportionately high rates](#) of disability and death from COVID-19. This heightened importance could also reflect the fact that PHDPs often work in settings that are directly funded or managed by federal, state, or local governments (e.g., FQHCs and local health departments-based clinics), while private-practice dental providers operate in a more self-regulating environment.

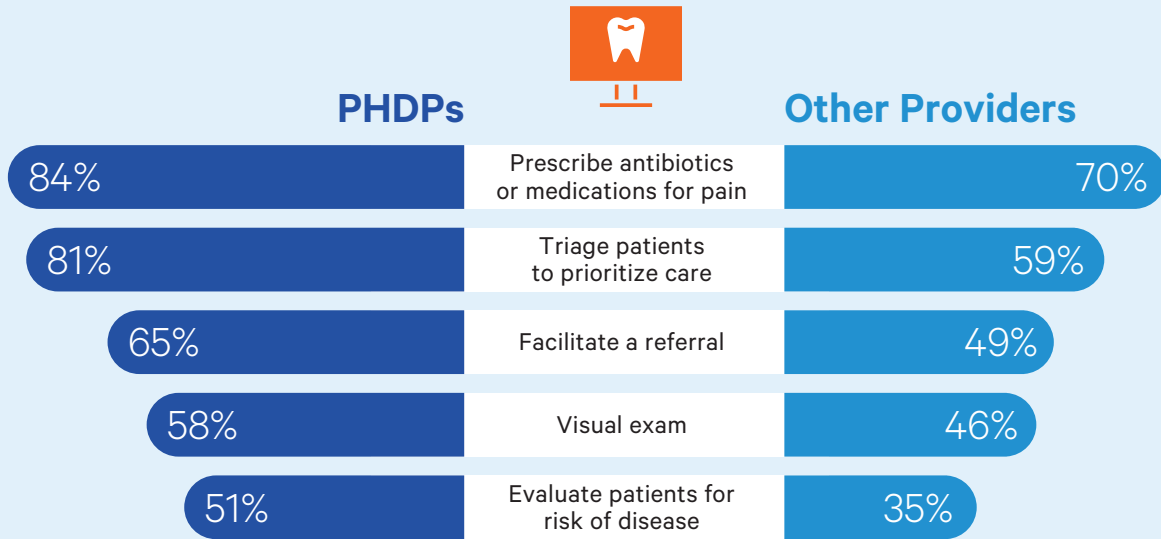
## More Likely to Embrace Telehealth

Providers were asked whether they expect their settings to adopt telehealth or other forms of non-contact dentistry in the future. PHDPs are much more likely than dental professionals in other settings to view non-contact care as part of the new normal.

- PHDPs (41%) were more than twice as likely to anticipate increased use of non-contact dentistry as a long-term change than were other providers (17%).
- 53% of PHDPs are currently using teledentistry or plan to use it in the near future. This compares with 32% of providers in other types of dental practices.
- PHDPs report seeing 14% of their patients via telehealth in the previous week, while other types of providers reported only seeing 8% of patients through this mechanism.
- Telehealth is most commonly being used by PHDPs for prescribing antibiotics or medications for pain (84%). Other uses include triaging patients to prioritize care (81%), facilitating a referral (65%), visually examining the patients' mouth/teeth (58%), and evaluating patients for risk of disease (51%). Providers in other types of settings are offering these services at much lower rates: prescribing antibiotics or medications for pain (70%), triaging patients to prioritize care (59%), facilitating a referral (49%), visually examining the patients' mouth/teeth (46%), and evaluating patients for risk of disease (35%).



## Telehealth dental services usage



In addition to making greater use of telehealth, PHDPs are more likely to predict that their teledentistry encounters will rise over the coming year. More than 1 in 3 PHDPs (36%) expect the number of telehealth encounters to increase over the next year, compared to 28% of other types of providers.

# Difficult Path to Recovery

One reason that PHDPs may be embracing innovation and change is that they continue to be heavily influenced by COVID-19-related restrictions and staffing shortages:

- Only 76% of FQHCs are open for most services, while 20% are seeing patients for urgent and emergency services only. In comparison, 96% of providers in private practice settings report being open for most services.
- 82% of PHDPs report seeing fewer patients and 78% report reduced payments and collections in the past week, as compared to a typical week prior to COVID-19. Providers in private practice settings (63%) were less likely to report seeing fewer patients.
- PHDPs continue to face staffing challenges. When surveyed in late May, 31% of providers in FQHCs reported that they had laid off or furloughed most or all of their staff, and only 36% had not furloughed or laid off anyone. While the current survey found that staffing has rebounded, 9% reported that most or all of their staff continued to be laid off or furloughed, and 44% had at least some staff still furloughed or laid off.
- Even when staff are not furloughed or laid off, PHDP offices are not fully staffed. In fact, 14% of PHDPs report that at least some staff are not coming to work.



**76%** of PHDPs  
**are open for most services,**  
compared to **96%** of providers in private practices



**82%** of PHDPs  
**report seeing fewer patients,**  
compared to **63%** of providers in private practices





# Pushing the Envelope in Oral Health

[More than three-quarters](#) of FQHCs operate under the patient-centered medical home model, and these health centers are more likely to use telehealth than are private-practice dental offices. This may be reflected by the attitudes that emerge in this survey of PHDPs.

Given that many FQHCs co-locate dental and medical services and place greater focus on preventive strategies, these health centers could utilize value-based care (VBC) initiatives and make greater use of telehealth to ease their financial pressures, both during and beyond the pandemic. VBC could improve patient outcomes while reducing costs.

Yet FQHC-led care innovations won't happen in a vacuum. States have a strong incentive to create a policy environment that encourages VBC initiatives and facilitate greater use of telehealth to improve oral health — and not just during the pandemic.

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## CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

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