

Opinion: Dentists are ready to get back to their patients

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Despite the announcement on May 21 that Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is ending the executive order effective May 29 that forbids dentists from performing non-elective procedures, it still bears noting that Michigan dentists and the critical role they play on the health care continuum have largely been ignored throughout the pandemic.

Many neighboring states opened up dentistry fully on May 1, yet Michigan held firm with no substantive evidence to support the ongoing restrictions. In the meantime, Michigan dental emergencies continued to increase each day — emergencies that could have been avoided if proper dental care was allowed. Dentistry is not elective. Patients who had simple dental work to be performed are now suffering with discomfort and pain — and dentists are being unnecessarily forced to resort to antibiotics and narcotics in many cases in response.

These same patients now have complex dental issues that are adversely affecting their oral and overall health. Teeth that needed simple fillings now require root canals. Teeth that were able to be saved are now being extracted. Patients are deteriorating at an alarming rate and needlessly suffering due to Michigan dentists' inability to supervise and properly treat them.

The goal for everyone is to limit exposure to the COVID-19 virus in order to decrease the opportunities for it to spread, correct? Then why have dentists in Michigan been guided and mandated to treat as minimally as possible? This directly results in more dental visits, more exposure, and more invasive procedures because of the postponement of optimal dentistry.

This completely defeats the goal that supposedly is the reason dental offices are essentially closed. If we are already open to emergency and "necessary" dental work, then why would we not treat that patient like we are trained to do and avoid future office visits?

Giving patients pain medications is not a good solution, especially considering the opioid epidemic in this country. Furthermore, properly treating patients with the appropriate approach will stabilize them, greatly reducing their chances of becoming a true emergency case. Isn't that in the best interest of everyone?

I am hearing horror stories from dental colleagues across the country who have been back to work since May 1 — and that makes me concerned for my own patients. They are seeing mouths with deteriorating bone loss from gum disease, kids with bleeding gums around their braces, teeth that have become infected and now need to be extracted.

Just because things are not hurting, does not mean there are not serious dental issues present. If these patients had the proper monitoring with routine dental visits and these issues were discovered at an early stage, these patients would never have progressed to this poor level of health. What will Michigan dentists encounter upon our full return?

To date, there is no reported transmission of COVID-19 related to a dental office. This affirms the exceptional level of PPE, disinfection techniques, and safety protocols that occur in dental offices. Dentists have been experts in infection control since the AIDS epidemic, and we will continue to be those experts now and in the post-COVID future.

The overwhelming majority of Michigan dentists are — and have been — ready to get back to our patients. It is passed time for them to receive the proper dental care we have been educating them about for decades. It is passed time to allow Michigan dental professionals to do what they know how to do — treat their patients appropriately, fully and safely.



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