

**March 17, 2020 - SPECIAL ALERT: NDBODE/NDDA Special Meeting and COVID-19 Guidance**

First, thank you for your continued patience as the NDDA Board of Trustees carefully monitors information from all parties weighing in on the COVID-19 situation before formulating any formal comment or plan of action. The NDDA recognizes the unprecedented and extraordinary circumstances dentists and all health care professionals are facing related to growing concern around COVID-19. The NDDA is deeply concerned for the health and well-being of the public and the dental team. At this time there is one official COVID-19 cases in North Dakota, which is a positive sign that COVID-19 is not spreading in North Dakota at the same rate as other areas. **As of Tuesday, March 17, there are no mandatory restrictions specific to dentistry in North Dakota.**

As the information and science around COVID-19 continues to evolve, the NDDA has maintained an ongoing dialogue with the American Dental Association (ADA), North Dakota Governor's Office, North Dakota Board of Dental Examiners (NDBODE) and the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDOH). The NDDA will be working closely with state resources to update very specific guidelines as they relate to social distancing, procedural modifications to control aerosolization, as well as educating our members on access to staff protective equipment and other safety measures. In addition to our state regulatory bodies we are closely monitoring the updates from the CDC and the World Health Organization. We want to ensure that we are making the best decisions with the information and science available in a well-coordinated manner with other health agencies. We will continuously strive to keep you updated on developments both from local and national authorities regarding this pandemic. We are waiting on comment and direction from the North Dakota Governor's Office, NDBODE and NDDOH regarding their recommendations and best practices going forward regarding the practice of dentistry in our state. **NDBODE has a special meeting scheduled for 6:00pm CDT, March 18, 2020 specifically to discuss and provide comment on COVID-19. The NDDA has been invited to this meeting and will attend on behalf of our membership. We will provide immediate updates following the meeting with regards to any positions or statements made on COVID-19 by NDBODE.**

State governments and many dental associations are issuing specific COVID-19 guidance including the ADA's recommendation that:

“All dentists close their offices for three weeks to patients seeking elective and non-urgent care. During that time dentists should provide only emergency dental care and medically necessary care. This will allow dentists to care for your most critical patients, while also alleviating the burden that emergency dental care would put on hospitals.”

NDDA members are encouraged to review available resources and apply that information to their individual situations when making a decision about whether to keep offices open and whether to triage non-emergency dental care. Absent governmental directives (federal, state, county, or municipal), it is up to each individual dentist to exercise their professional judgement in deciding what additional precautions should be implemented and whether or how to continue dental office operations. Practices are encouraged to exceed standard infection control procedures and implement policies to minimize patients' time and possible contact in the waiting rooms.

**To reiterate, at this time there is not a state or national requirement for dentists to cease practicing,** however, this decision is ultimately up to each dental practice and we encourage practice owners to assess all risks associated with dental staff and patient safety. This rapidly changing situation has come with an overload of information and misinformation. We thank you for your patience during these past few days as the agencies of authority have sifted through this information to make the correct recommendations to protect our profession and our patients. We anticipate that we will receive more state and federal guidance over the next week concerning how providers can prevent transmission of the virus and safely treat patients. As health care professionals, it is up to dentists to make well-informed decisions about their patients and practices. The NDDA is committed to providing the latest information to the profession in a useful and timely manner. We are constantly evaluating our recommendations and will update them on an ongoing basis as new information becomes available from our state and local public health authorities.

The NDDA does not take this decision by the ADA lightly, and it is being done out of an abundance of caution during one of the most disruptive public health emergencies in modern history. As healthcare providers, we all have a role to play by following evidence-based public health advice to help slow the spread of the virus and "flatten the curve." During this time the NDDA will continue its ongoing dialogue with state health officials. Should you choose to remain open, we recommend that you take this time to make sure that your practice has appropriate COVID-19 screening protocols in place and that your infection control and OSHA practices are up to date. We also recommend that offices consider implementing a virtual waiting room in their practices to better maintain social distancing.

We believe that by taking ADA precautions dentists can make a difference in helping preserve the limited supply of personal protective equipment critical for emergency dental care and frontline healthcare personnel responding to the pandemic. We recognize the gravity of these extreme measures and are sensitive to the economic impact that it will have on our member offices. Rest assured that the NDDA will advocate on behalf of all oral health providers in North Dakota for economic relief packages. At this time, we are working on a list of resources and suggestions for how to mitigate your health and financial risks. Additionally, to help support your practices and communications with patients, we are developing resources and templates that you can tailor to communicate with your patients and staff to help address their questions relating to COVID-19.

We do want members to know that dentists are in one of the highest risk categories for both transmission and contraction of the Coronavirus as a majority of dental procedures performed create significant aerosols in the operatories. As a part of the healthcare community, we have an obligation to protect the safety of our patients and staff. Please give added consideration to the risks of exposure to yourself, anyone on your staff, or anyone within your patient base, that has compromising health conditions. Please pay attention to announcements regarding the report of cases locally and act accordingly. Offices that chose to remain open should implement best practices to protect staff and patients.

At this challenging time, it is important to stay calm in the face of this storm and use science and knowledge to help us navigate forward. We urge all members to exercise your best judgement and caution during this time and to reach out to the NDDA or ADA with any questions or concerns. We thank you for your commitment to providing the highest level of care for North Dakota's patients and the dental profession.

**If you choose to continue seeing patients**

If you choose to continue seeing patients after ADA guidance and wait for the North Dakota Governor's Office, NDBODE, NDDOH, or any other state/local authority comment on COVID-19, please take additional precautions to help slow the spread of COVID-19:

1. Check the CDC website daily and follow the CDC guidelines to minimize risk. The NDDA website and the ADA website are also posting daily information.

2. Screen your patients BEFORE they arrive for their appointments. At the time of appointment reminders, ask these important screening questions:

- Have you traveled domestically or internationally in the past 15 days?
- Have you come into contact with anyone who has traveled internationally in the past 15 days?
- Have you come into contact with anyone who has tested positive for the coronavirus?
- Do you currently have a cold?
- Have you been sick in the past 14 days?
- Do you currently have a fever?
- Have you had a fever in the past 14 days?

If your patients answer "yes" to any of these questions, we highly recommend you postpone their appointments to a later date.

3. Take each patient's temperature. If the temperature is above 99.1F, consider delaying treatment.

4. In addition to cleaning treatment areas between patients, be sure to also clean waiting room chairs, doorknobs, pens and other surfaces.

5. Remove magazines, toys and patient waiting room entertainment items.

6. To help maintain social distancing, consider implementing a virtual waiting room where patients can wait in their cars until you text them to come inside for their appointments.

7. Consider restricting or postponing preventive or elective treatment appointments.

8. Consider postponing appointments with those who are elderly, immunocompromised, pregnant or part of an at-risk population.

**Have a plan in place in the event of an office closure:**

1. Create a communication plan for patients stressing the importance of their safety but assuring them that you are available for emergencies if needed. Be sure to put this notice on your office voicemail, text network, website, social media accounts, and office door, etc.
2. Make an agreement with a nearby dental office to take on dental emergencies if you become unable to do so.
3. Have remote access to your patient schedule for the following 4 weeks and a way to contact patients if needed.
4. Be sure all employees have a clear understanding of the sick leave policy and PTO benefits.
5. Read and be familiar with your insurance policies. Do any of your plans offer coverage under these circumstances?