Use of Teledentistry to Increase Access to Oral Health Services During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Theekshana Fernando, MBBS, MPH, CHES®, Simona Surdu, MD, PhD, Margaret Langelier, MSHSA, Ellen O’Malley, PhD
Oral Health Workforce Research Center, Oral Health Workforce Research Center, School of Public Health, University at Albany

ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: This study aimed to examine the trends of teledentistry use to meet emergent patient needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS: Researchers at the Oral Health Workforce Research Center (OHWRC) conducted an environmental scan of the literature and public and federal regulations (including those afflicting provision of teledentistry) to describe the immediate and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the dental delivery system. Researchers also conducted a survey of consumers of oral health services in conjunction with the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) through the Consumer Survey of Health Care Access Fielded in June 2020, December 2020, June 2021, and December 2021. Descriptive analyses were conducted using the AAMC’s Consumer Survey of Health Care Access. A data analysis software was used to analyze the data.

RESULTS: Teledentistry was an emerging modality in dentistry but, prior to COVID-19, uptake had been confined to public health settings, mobile and portable dental programs, and to use as a teaching tool in dental education. The literature review suggested that uptake of teledentistry as a modality for consultation with patients increased exponentially during the course of the pandemic.

In April 2020, use of teledentistry was about 60 times greater than pre-pandemic levels. While use of teledentistry modalities decreased once dental offices began reopening, use of teledentistry remained 12.7 times higher in the last week of August 2020, when dental practices were mostly open, than at the same time in 2019.

Provider Perspective: Virtual technology/telecommunications use was higher in practices with DSO affiliation than within those that were not affiliated with a DSO.

Large group (101) practices also reported higher technology/telecommunication use than uses dental and practices with 2-9 dentists.

The greatest percentage change in the number of dental visits via teledentistry at DSOs was in the Midwest, followed by the Northeast, South, and Western region. Nationally, the number of dental visits via teledentistry at DSOs was 55 times greater than during the pre-pandemic period.

The proportion of FOHOs offering health services via teledentistry increased from 35.1% in 2019 to 96.0% in 2020, representing a 74% increase.

CONCLUSIONS

While teledentistry is unlikely to replace in-person visits to an oral health provider for services that already have demonstrated promising impacts on access to care particularly for consultation, monitoring, screening, and pre- and post-operative care.

Experience with teledentistry during the pandemic allowed for providers and patients to understand the utility of these teledentistry modalities for improving capacity to address the needs of patients.

Expanded and continued use of teledentistry beyond the pandemic requires overcoming barriers such as how state dental practices act classify teledentistry services, reimbursement of telehealth care by payers and across data security, and inequities among accessing technology, especially in vulnerable populations.

REFERENCES/ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


6. Theekshana Fernando, MBBS, MPH, CHES, Simona Surdu, MD, PhD, Margaret Langelier, MSHSA, Ellen O’Malley, PhD
Oral Health Workforce Research Center, School of Public Health, University at Albany

CONCLUSIONS

While teledentistry is unlikely to replace in-person visits to an oral health provider for services that already have demonstrated promising impacts on access to care particularly for consultation, monitoring, screening, and pre- and post-operative care.

Experience with teledentistry during the pandemic allowed for providers and patients to understand the utility of these teledentistry modalities for improving capacity to address the needs of patients.

Expanded and continued use of teledentistry beyond the pandemic requires overcoming barriers such as how state dental practices act classify teledentistry services, reimbursement of telehealth care by payers and across data security, and inequities among accessing technology, especially in vulnerable populations.