

A bright future after lockdown

Richard Scarborough speaks to Guy Deeming, owner of Queensway Orthodontics and former Director for Clinical Practice at the British Orthodontic Society, about treating patients virtually and why he believes the future is brighter than ever.



Richard Scarborough

Richard: What have you done during lockdown in terms of offering a digital or online service?

Guy: The world is in the middle of a once-in-a-lifetime system shock, and the pace of change has just increased 100-fold – we have to come out of this ahead of the wave. I now can't accept that it's OK for the patient to come into the practice for every single appointment because it is what we always did – it's not reasonable or desirable and the technology is there to support a transition to a higher proportion of online or AI driven care.

We've been doing digital reviews, online consultations and we've opened an online shop during lockdown. The shop was something we had been planning to do anyway as a way of reducing the friction and pressure around reception – this was clearly the time to get this done.

I've been using a virtual platform called Doxy.me for our online consultations. It's a great platform with lots of functionality and good data governance; you can get digital consent during the consultation and a data processor agreement to fit with GDPR compliance. We are committed to carrying on with the model post-lockdown as the benefits are clear for all who have experienced it.

Richard: Can you tell us more about how the virtual consultations and digital reviews are working?

Guy: We were already doing a little bit of virtual consultation with private patients using SmileMate from Dental Monitoring, so we have accelerated that across the whole range of patients. In addition, all of our Invisalign caseload has been managed using Dental Monitoring for a number of years which has worked incredibly well. We are now rolling this out in a phased way for our fixed appliance patients too. A big change but a positive one.

Our digital reviews for existing patients have also gone down well and we have now done in excess of 1,000 of these. It is nice to provide patients with that contact, reassurance and support.

Fundamentally, it's about sensibly reducing, rather than eliminating, face-to-face contact for those appointments where we can, and ensuring that the outcome is not compromised. From that initial contact, that we're having virtually at the moment, we can then move to put patients onto a waiting list for treatment or scheduling a case start safe in the knowledge that the requisite face-to-face visit is worthwhile and essential to progress things.

It's about learning how much activity we can move into a virtual environment and initial impressions are that it is significant. The most dangerous phrase is 'this is the way we've always done it', and I think in dental and healthcare settings we are often guilty of adopting this position.

Richard: What have patients' reactions been to these virtual consultations?

Guy: My heart has swelled with the positive feedback from patients who have not had to leave their home – especially when they can't – to have their treatment checked, problem assessed or initial consultation. It's a revelation.

While it's not the same as seeing a patient in person, it does help patients understand that we're there for them and that we care.

Richard: What are your thoughts on the future for dentistry after COVID-19?

Guy: The future is bright, especially for those, as most of us are, caring and empathetic providers of dental health care.

The way we relate to regulators may also be bright as they will hopefully see the need to re-visit their position as the balance of risk and benefit shifts – especially with respect to technology utilisation as an alternative to face-to-face visits.

My hunch is that there will be a metaphorical day of reckoning when organisations, within and outwith dentistry, will be judged by how they conducted themselves during and after COVID-19 lockdown. If you have done the right thing and put people before numbers, even though it's hard and scary in the short term, it will come back to you in spades from your team and your community.

Richard: Guy, it's always interesting to talk to you, thanks for sharing your thoughts.

About Richard

Richard Scarborough is the Head of Medenta, a long-established provider of patient finance. Medenta has been supporting dental practices for over 15 years with finance solutions that help patients to say 'yes' to the treatment they want. Offering some of the lowest subsidy rates in the market, Medenta is one of the few providers that offers its practices a comprehensive support wrap-around service, which includes an online patient application portal and an e-learning suite containing a range of learning modules, many of which come with vCPD and have been tailored specifically to the dental industry.

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