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Managing a perio practice during the pandemic



— ALBERTO ORTIZ-VIGÓN

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Covid-19 has created new challenges for dental practitioners. Keeping practices safe with protective equipment and safety measures is fundamental, but this also means that dentists can see fewer patients. On top of that, some patients are delaying dental treatment for financial reasons. How are periodontal practitioners coping with the practical and economic impact of the pandemic? Myroslav Solonko asked Alberto Ortiz-Vigón, a fellow alumnus of the EFP accredited programme at the Complutense University of Madrid and owner of a dental practice in Bilbao exclusively dedicated to periodontology and implant dentistry that is part of the PerioCentrum Group of clinics.



PERIO LIFE: WHAT WAS THE INITIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOU AND YOUR PRACTICE?

ALBERTO ORTIZ-VIGÓN: One of my biggest concerns initially was the team. There was great amount of uncertainty about the future, they had many questions, and I did not have all the answers. My first decision was to keep my team safe at home – although I myself remained in the practice the whole period to attend emergencies. It was mid-May when we thought we could restart again, albeit establishing a Covid-19 protocol. Initially only four out of thirty team members started, attending only urgent cases – patients with pain, infections, or prosthetic problems. This lasted until mid-June, and by the end of July most of the team was back at work. One of the main differences was the time of the appointments, we had to space out patients so we could disinfect thoroughly. Getting used to the new protocol was tricky.

“GETTING USED TO THE NEW PROTOCOL WAS TRICKY”

PL: HOW DID YOU COPE WITH THE RECOMMENDED PERSONAL PROTECTION EQUIPMENT (PPE)?

AOV: The team was happy to have access to all this protection. But when we started working, we realised that it was harder than expected: everything took longer, it was not that comfortable, the magnification glasses would steam up. We had to take care of all these aspects, mainly by having longer appointments. It was also difficult to purchase all the PPE we needed. At the beginning we had some stock, but we ran out and it was difficult to find the stock we needed in the market. This became a kind of a nightmare during these months. At the start, we made a big purchase for the PerioCentrum Group, but after a couple of months we started running out of high-protection masks (FPP3), so we started sterilizing those masks, but only performing a maximum of three uses and with a surgical mask on top. We did what we could to provide the proper service to our patients, as by that time we had many emergencies because we had been closed for nearly two months.

PL: WHAT ABOUT THE PROCEDURES THAT WE NORMALLY USE IN PERIODONTOLOGY? THE RECOMMENDATION FROM SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES AND ORGANISATIONS WAS TO REDUCE THE USE OF AEROSOL-GENERATING PROCEDURES. AND PERIODONTISTS USE A LOT OF ULTRASOUND AND AIRFLOW DEVICES, WHICH ARE THE BASIS OF NON-SURGICAL PERIODONTAL THERAPY.

AOV: Initially we decided not to use those piezoelectric or ultrasonic devices so we could reduce or avoid any micro-sprays. We went back to manual scaling for maintenance of our patients and we delayed many appointments up until August. We decided mainly to deal with patients with urgent or acute situations. We gave guidelines to patients before coming to the practice, such as to come alone and to be punctual, to avoid a crowded waiting room. We also try to perform every possible treatment in a single appointment. We perform full-mouth disinfections instead of dividing the appointments, reducing the risk for patients and the exposure to other patients. We are trying to give confidence to the patients that the





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dental practice is a safe space, where the risk of getting the virus is very low and, when we see numbers, the figures in relation to infection of dental professionals are very low. However, it still seems like we are working in a spacecraft because we are all dressed like astronauts!

PL: HAVE YOU TRIED TO INCORPORATE TELEMEDICINE INTO YOUR PRACTICE?

AOV: That’s a really good question, because every single crisis also brings new opportunities. During the 2020 restrictions we realised it was the time to scale up our digitalisation and at the same time we heard about the development of a new remote diagnosis and patient-monitoring tool and we enrolled in it as beta testers. MyDentist (www.mydentist.biz) is a telehealth platform that is now embedded in our management tool and allows us to improve our service and have a direct communication with patients. The patient can do an initial test and receive a diagnosis by taking a picture. They can then access different professionals listed by their specialisation and with verified patient reviews. Once they select you, they can book an appointment, share their digital medical records, and choose between having an online appointment or coming to the clinic. Even though we are still testing the technology, this could be lifesaving if we have another lockdown. I truly believe that this platform will transform dentistry, allowing a whole new digital experience and simplifying processes for both sides.

In the coming years in Spain, the number of dentists is going to increase to such levels that digitalisation, positioning, and new marketing tools to stand out are going to be a must-have.

PL: HOW HAVE YOU BEEN AFFECTED FROM A FINANCIAL POINT OF VIEW?

AOV: We have had a 12% decrease in treatment acceptance by patients, affecting mainly those treatments with a higher cost. Due to economic uncertainty and job-market instability, patients have delayed their treatments.





In addition, we had to assume additional costs to introduce higher safety measures. From the beginning, safety was key for me and I bought all sorts of devices: ozone, HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filters, double aspiration for the dental chairs... of course, these systems come with a cost. The new equipment, together with the PPE, has allowed us to keep everyone safe, both team and patients. The team of professionals is really important for us, and some of them have worked by my side for more than 15 years. When it came to numbers, we prioritised keeping all of them over the margin and profit of the PerioCentrum practices. It was a big decision from a financial point of view, but we are really proud of it and I believe it delivered the right message to the team – that we value them and that we were not going to let them down during this crisis. The team is the main asset of a company and now we are stronger and closer.

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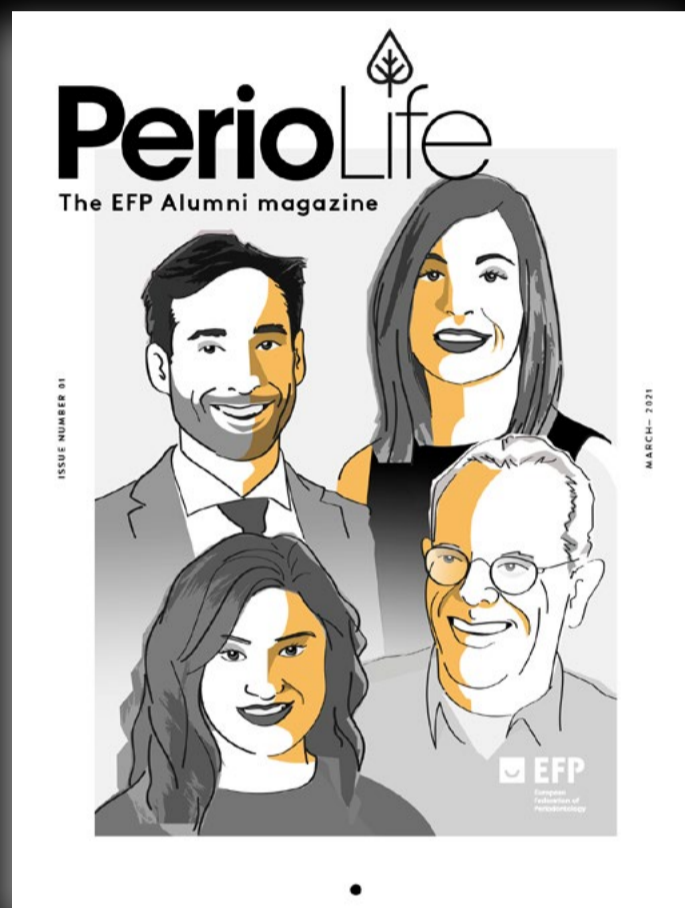
PL: WHAT WOULD BE YOUR ADVICE TO PERIODONTISTS, AS A CLINICIAN AND PRACTICE OWNER ON HOW TO PROCEED IN THE COMING MONTHS?

AOV: We can always get something good even out of the worst things. The best advice I can give is to go digital. If you digitalise with telemedicine, e-health, platforms, apps, digital management of your practice, pictures of your patients, 3D scanning – if you have these digital tools, this crisis will be less invasive of your daily practice. I think another effect of this crisis will be to help us go more towards prevention, which is the key. Maybe this will help catalyse the change towards prevention as digital tools allow us to get closer to our patients and give them access to audio-visual content that empowers them. The knowledge society is an innovation from information and communication technologies in which the increase in transfers of information modifies in many ways the way in which many activities are carried out in modern society. Paradigms are changing and patients are becoming “smart health” consumers.

Finally, we need to take responsibility and properly educate the population towards prevention. Oral care is not just something aesthetic – it saves lives. A simple gesture like annual hygiene can significantly reduce the risk of systemic diseases.

Alberto Ortiz-Vigón is an EFP alumnus, holding a master’s degree in periodontology from the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain), from which he also received his doctorate cum laude in 2017 and where he teaches on the EFP-accredited master’s programme. His practice in Bilbao, in the Basque Country of Northern Spain, is part of the PerioCentrum Group of clinics, a network formed by specialists in periodontology and implant dentistry who are all EFP alumni, mostly from the Complutense. PerioCentrum (<https://periozentrum.com/en/periozentrum>) has practices in six Spanish cities (Ávila, Bilbao, Guadalajara, Madrid, San Sebastián, Segovia and in Verona in Italy).

Perio Life & EFP Alumni



Perio Life, the magazine of EFP Alumni, is published twice a year and presents articles about and by alumni of the EFP-accredited postgraduate programme in periodontology.

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