

HEALTH & DISEASE

Opinion

How enlisting dentists can speed up Covid-19 vaccinations

OPINION: Dental care providers have the skills, the facilities and the trust of patients who might otherwise miss out

By [Mary E. Northridge](#) 02.03.2021

Even as the Biden administration has upped its Covid-19 vaccine goal to 1.5 million per day, [early reports](#) say vaccination rates are lagging in hard-hit Black and Latino communities. On both fronts, America's dentists can help.

Dental professionals — dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistants — have been responding to the pandemic from the outset, even as many practices were shut down by the emergency. At the health center where I work in Brooklyn, dental providers first donated their personal protective equipment (PPE) to the affiliated hospital. Then many of them were redeployed to perform arterial blood gas measurements and even transport deceased patients to makeshift morgues.

Today, the urgent need is to get millions of shots in arms. States should immediately authorize dental providers to administer Covid-19 vaccines. That would not only expand the trained immunization workforce, it would open up additional sites to dispense the vaccine and bolster vaccine acceptance among patients who do not routinely go to the doctor.

This is not without precedent. In 2019, [Oregon](#) became the first state to allow dentists to offer any vaccine to patients. Other states, including Illinois and Minnesota, allow dentists to administer influenza vaccines. Since late 2020, [Arkansas](#), Massachusetts and California have permitted dentists to administer Covid-19 vaccines. During this devastating public health emergency, this idea needs to be extended to all states.

There are more than [110,000 dentists](#) — excluding specialists — and over [200,000](#) hygienists in the United States, and they already have the skills needed. Dentists routinely administer intra- and extra-oral injections to provide anesthesia, so any additional training would be minimal. In California, for instance, dentists will do four hours of online training before joining the vaccination effort.

California currently plans to utilize dentists just as extra manpower at vaccine clinics. But dental offices, too, will be valuable in vaccinating hard-to-reach populations. Dental offices and clinics are a safe location. Despite early concerns that they might be particularly vulnerable to aerosol-borne transmission of the novel coronavirus, evidence is mounting that transmission at dental sites is rare. As in medical settings, precautions such as using PPE and increasing ventilation are effective. Nearly all dental practices and clinics have reopened to provide care. And that has been essential during the pandemic: Treating damaged teeth, tooth decay, gum disease and oral sores before they become acute prevents patients from going to emergency departments because of dental pain.

Interrupting community spread, however, is the chief imperative to prevent Covid-19 cases from overwhelming hospitals today. And that means adding vaccines to dental services.

Inoculating patients who are already in chairs for dental visits could improve vaccine acceptance. At the health center where I work, a simple workflow change for preventive tooth sealant placement nearly doubled the number of eligible children treated, from 37 percent to nearly 78 percent. Rather than schedule a separate appointment, sealants were applied during the kids' initial or recall visits. Fewer visits meant greater acceptance of the treatment and higher rates of completion. The same could be true for vaccines.

Community dental clinics also serve hard-to-reach patients — minorities, immigrants, impoverished people — those who may be hesitant to seek out the vaccine because of historical injustices, fear of deportation or lack of health insurance. But dental providers have often earned trust through longstanding service in these communities. Ongoing quality improvement studies at our health center, for instance, document no racial/ethnic bias in treatment by dental providers. When patients are treated with respect regardless of their ability to pay for services, they may be more willing to accept a vaccine that will protect them, their families and their communities.

Many states have suspended regulations and expanded the scope of dental practices to combat the pandemic. To help ensure health equity and successfully immunize the whole US population, all states ought to enlist dental providers to administer Covid-19 vaccines as well.

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