

## TAKE OFF YOUR MASK AND SAY 'AAH,' MY RISK AND MY PATIENTS' REWARD

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It was your average Wednesday in the dental clinic of an urban metropolis – I was scurrying from one treatment room to another tending to patients with a smile, while taking quick breaks to fill out my charts whenever a free moment arose. Twelve noon had come and gone as it usually does when your schedule is packed this tight, but I realized I wasn't feeling the usual midday hunger that often stops me in my tracks. In fact, I was actually feeling a bit of an upset stomach creeping in. That, paired with a pestering headache still lingering from the night before had me worried, and suddenly a wave of anxiety began to wash over my body. I immediately started replaying the previous hours, minutes, days in my head, re-tracking my steps and replaying every interaction up until this moment. *"Was someone at the small dinner I attended on Saturday COVID positive but asymptomatic?" "Did I come into contact with a patient who was unknowingly incubating the virus themselves?"* Could this really be what I think it is? All of these mild symptoms wouldn't have phased me as much if I worked by myself in an administrative capacity, the voice behind a phone or protected by a divider, only sharing maybe a pen or paperwork with a patient. Or even if I still worked at my private practice of fifteen years in New York City where I had the luxury of scheduling patients one hour apart, decreasing exposure to disease by 300%. But that just wasn't my current reality. I dialed my primary care doctor as fast as I could, but as the phone rang for what felt like a lifetime, I thought to myself – "here I am, a dentist in a public health clinic, advocating for access and availability of affordable dental care for my low-income patients, at the height of a global pandemic, and I could be COVID-positive..."

Since the first plane from China landed in New Jersey on February 4, 2020, and the national news broke that we were facing a global pandemic as we were about to welcome Spring, we have all been living in a state of, almost unbearable, high alert. The frenzy and despair we witnessed across China, had just landed on our shores. The wearing of masks, frequent washing of our hands and social distancing became a requirement for our survival. And little did we know, we were soon going to understand the dread of watching the numbers of daily infected people skyrocket and death tolls that would overflow morgues. Those moments made me hyper-focused on trying to protect the ones I love. My husband and I wanted to know where our three children were and wanted to bring them close to home with us, because at times, it felt like this world was coming to an end. My daughter who lives and works in California flew home and has been able to work remotely via video conferencing. My middle son has been able to work from home 2-3 days out of the week, limiting his exposure to

the office and others. And my oldest son and his wife have been able to turn their dining room into a makeshift law office, burning away at the midnight oil. It's offered *some* comfort knowing that they are staying as safe as possible and limiting the risk of exposure. I've tried to hold on to those small moments of peace in the chaos by relishing in the blessing to have my immediate family near during a complete shutdown when so many have been forced into loneliness. To savor the feelings of hugs and sounds of "I love you" flowing more freely than they had at the onset.

It's now Fall and we are still navigating this ever-changing COVID19 reality. Health clinics became a high traffic resource for the City as soon as the quarantine was lifted by the Mayor. As healthcare workers, my husband, the city Health Director, and I have had to return to work to care for the people we serve in a full capacity. And since then, our entire dental team has been extremely careful to follow State and CDC's healthcare recommendations. Also have adopted additional infection control and safety protocols including use of all our personal protective equipment (PPE), pre-screening temperature checks, air filtration in clinic floor, surface disinfection and aerosol disinfectant. All in efforts to maintain our safety and that of our patients against any potential infection of COVID19.

You see, in most healthcare settings, patients are not allowed to remove their mask, but in dentistry they must. With every appointment, I ask the patient in the dental chair looking up at me, "remove your mask and open wide, please." In that instant, social distancing becomes a figment of my imagination, and I'm praying that my mask, eye field, gown and other PPE are protecting me and by using our high power suction while I treat my patients, I'll prevent the airborne saliva, mist, germs and bacteria from flying and whirling in the treatment room. Even though it may seem too risky to keep dental care available while COVID continues to thrive, the one thing COVID can't shut down is a throbbing toothache or other dental conditions. The patients who make the journey to see us dentalcare providers are looking for treatment, for relief, immediately – and I love to see the relief and confidence flood my patient's faces when their smile is restored. Take my recent 16-year-old patient who lost her two upper front teeth in her home country before coming to America a few months ago (see images). Seeing her new smile, fitted with a small partial denture, light up her face with tears in her eyes when she saw herself in the mirror is the type of reaction I live for.



*(above) My 16 year-old patient's new dentures, fit during COVID*

...As the dial tone on my phone continued to rattle in my head, I gathered my belongings and shared with the dental team I didn't feel well and was heading home for the day, trying as

hard as I could to mask the trembling in my voice. I could not wait any longer, and went straight to visit my primary care doctor. She was able to calm me down and arranged for me to get tested for COVID19.

Two days later I received a letter via email. NEGATIVE, it read. A wave of immense relief rolled across my body in the same all-consuming way the fear did when I first thought I could be sick. I gave myself this moment – a moment of celebration, peace, victory. Being that I had “mild” COVID-like symptoms but worked in a high-risk environment, it was advised by my doctor that I follow the two-week quarantine. I followed instructions, but it was not easy as I am a highly social person that enjoys daily human interaction and conversation. Fourteen days came and went and I went for my second COVID19 test. Again, NEGATIVE! That night I set out all the finest dinner plates and enjoyed my family’s company, because now I truly understand that tomorrow is not promised.

It’s my first Monday back in the office and my first patient of the day is sitting in the dental chair with a concerned look that says; “I hope you can help me!” I greeted him gently, “Good morning, tell me what brings you in?”

“Doctor, my tooth hurts.”

I smiled under my mask and face shield and with a peaceful sigh told him, “Take off your mask, open your mouth, and let’s take a look.”