

One year of CED work on COVID-19

JUNE 2021

I - INTRODUCTION

The Council of European Dentists (CED) is a European not-for-profit association which represents over 340,000 dentists across Europe. The association was established in 1961 and is now composed of 33 national dental associations from 31 European countries.

One year since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the CED takes a look at the impact that the public health crisis had on dentists and oral health in Europe. We assess the challenges faced by the profession and the shifted focus of the CED work from March 2020 to April 2021.

Understanding the impacts of COVID-19 on dentistry and oral health is key in ensuring that dentists are able to effectively respond to the needs of the public and patients in times of serious cross-border threats. As the sector begins to recover, dental professionals need adequate support to adapt to the new circumstances and interact with patients safely.

II – CED SURVEY RESULTS

The CED has launched in March 2020 a series of questionnaires to better understand the scale and nature of the COVID-19 consequences on dentistry. The 19 survey rounds assessed during a year the main issues that European dentists dealt with throughout the pandemic and outlined the national differences.

The first survey rounds revealed the closure of dental practices in many countries. Provision of dental care was limited to emergencies and routine care was restricted or paused in 67% (n=21) to 100% (n=31) of cases starting from April 2020. This had a profound impact on the delivery of dental care until autumn 2020 (Fig. 1).

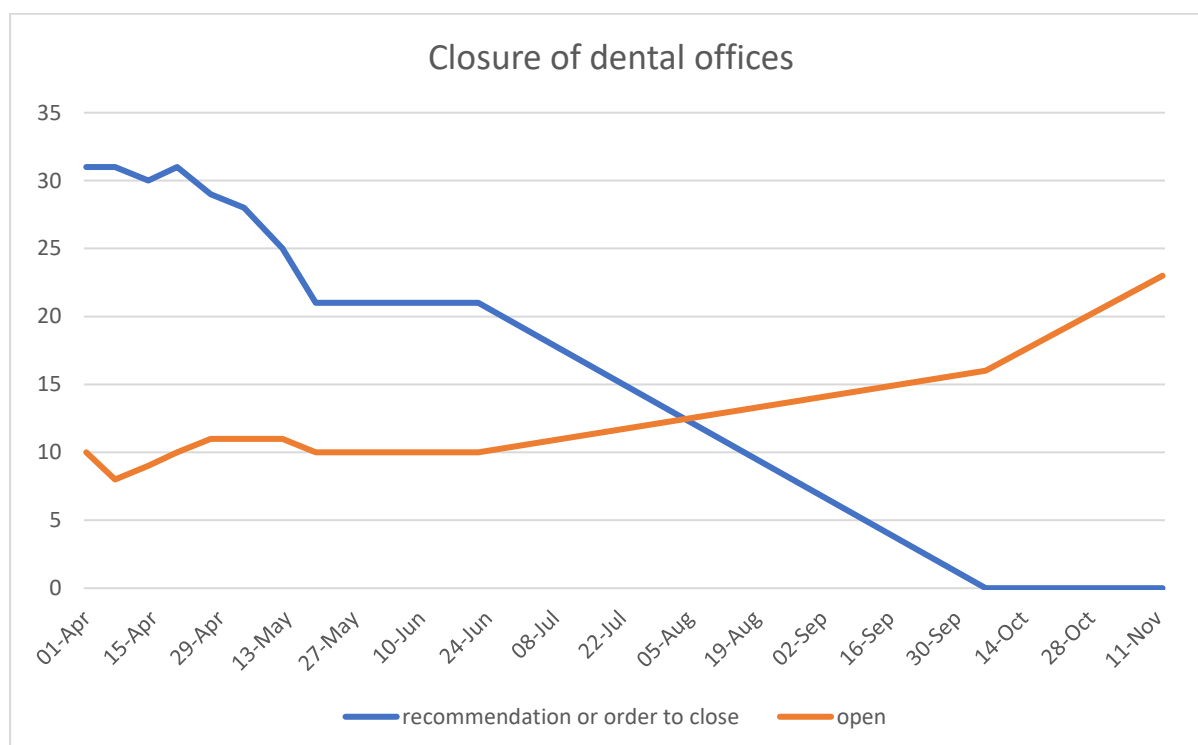


Figure 1. Evolution of the recommendations and orders to close dental offices in European countries from April 2020 to November 2020.

Another reported issue was the lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). More than 58% (n=17) reported PPE shortages and lack of access to appropriate equipment, such as masks, goggles, surgical gowns and visors, from April to June 2020 (Fig. 2).

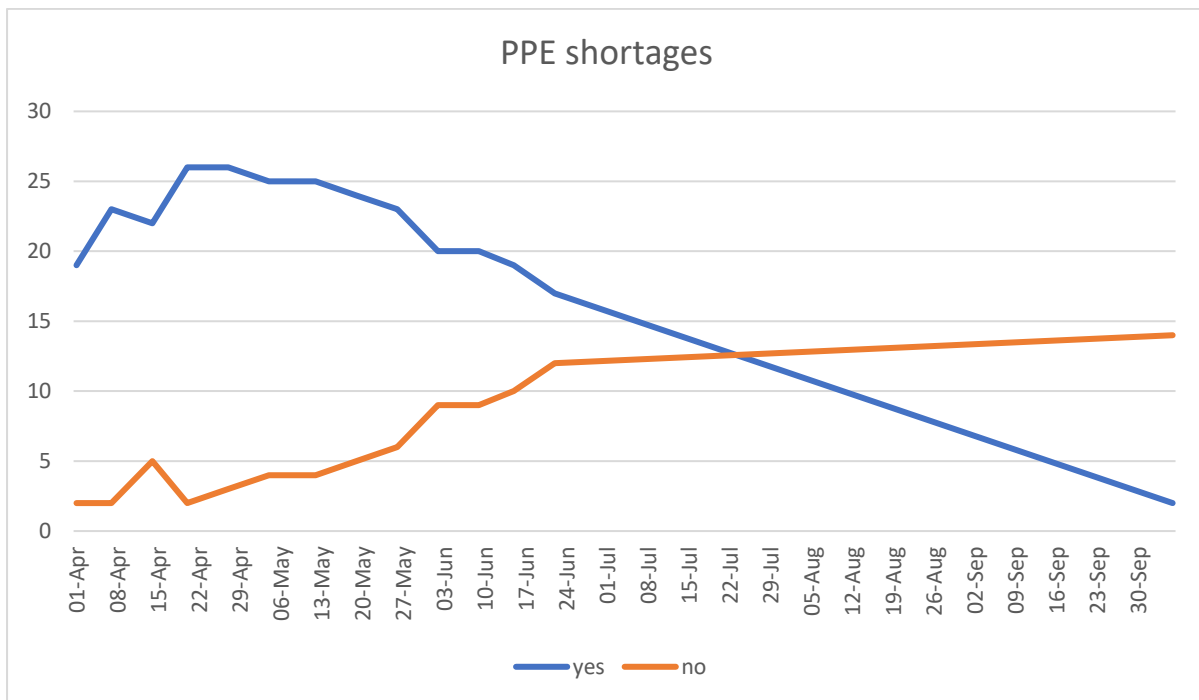


Figure 2. Lack of PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic from April 2020 to October 2020

Moreover, multiple countries flagged increased costs associated with infection control. The imposed closure of practices, increased PPE costs, financial pressures and exclusion from government support, have led to additional worries. Some Member States received financial support from their governments, either offered directly to dentists and health professionals (pension contributions, taxes, loans, etc.) or general financial support offered to all citizens or all employees in the context of COVID-19 crisis. However, many practices had to adapt to the additional economic burden (Fig. 3).

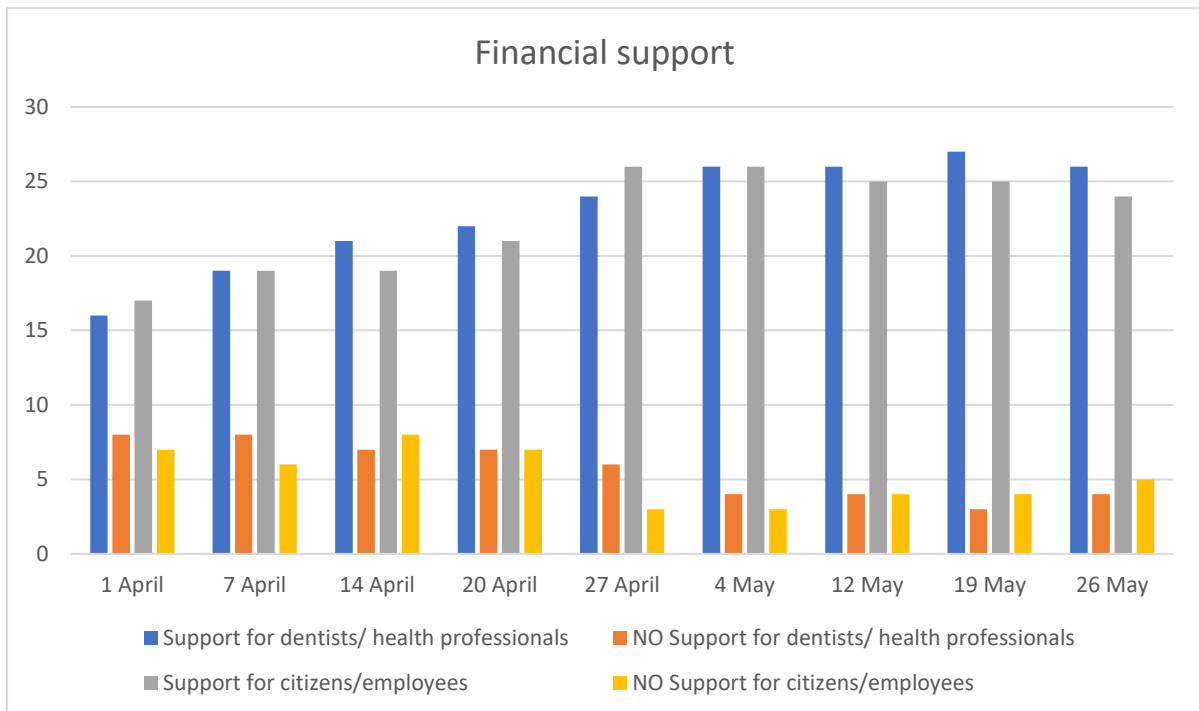


Figure 3. Government financial support received by dentists during the COVID-19 pandemic from April 2020 to June 2020

As challenges arose during the past year, dentists urged to be included in the prioritisation groups of the national vaccination rollouts. Dentists were gradually added to the healthcare professionals' priority groups, as showed in Fig. 4.

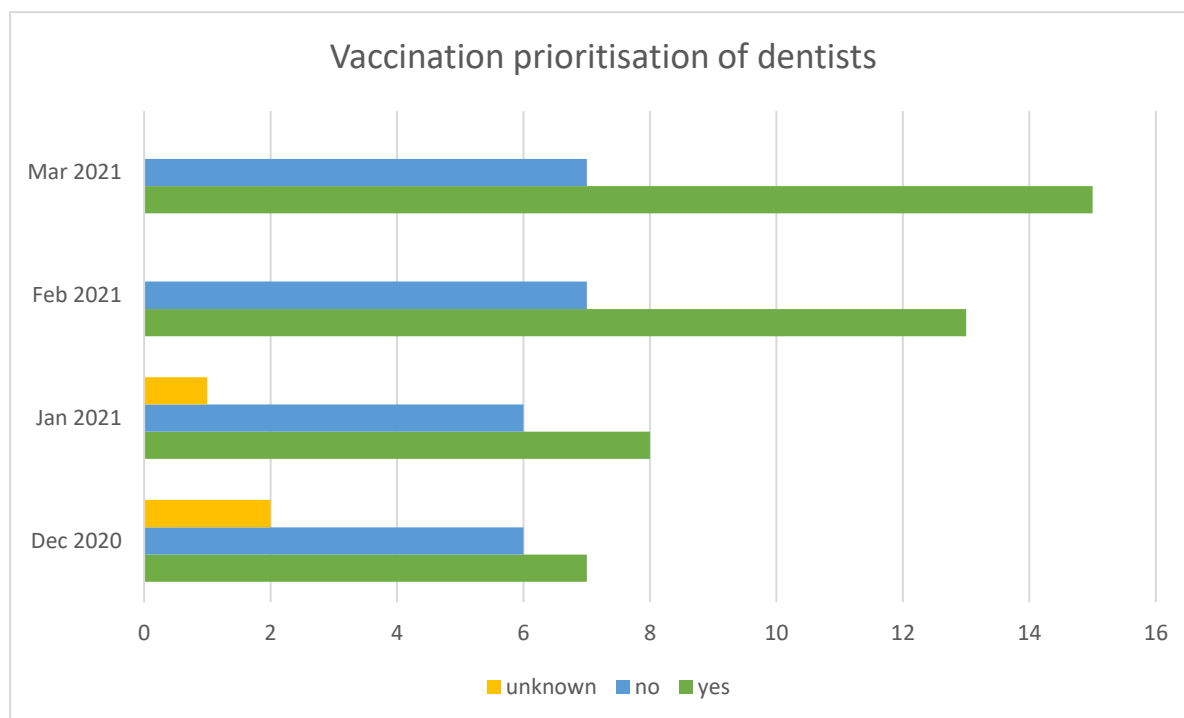


Figure 4. Overview of the evolution of dentists' prioritisation as essential healthcare workers entitled to receive COVID-19 vaccines.

After a full year of living with the pandemic, it is safe to state that dentistry is an essential part of healthcare. During second and third waves, many practices across Europe have been able to remain open despite additional lockdowns because data showed that there are no additional infection risks in dental practices, also reported by other international dental associations¹. The 19 CED surveys monitored the rate of infection among dentists from October 2020 to March 2021. In more than 77% cases (n=15) national dental associations did not report an increase in the infection rate of dentists (Fig. 5). Moreover, the majority of COVID-19 infections did not originate from professional settings, as reported by the respondents.

The dental infection statistics gathered from the CED surveys show the remarkably low incidence of COVID-19 in dental offices, which allows us to conclude that here does not appear to be a grave danger of being exposed to COVID-19 in dental settings, particularly as the pandemic is decelerating.

¹ <https://www.ada.org/en/publications/ada-news/2021-archive/june/ada-tells-white-house-no-grave-danger-of-being-exposed-to-covid-19-in-dental-settings>

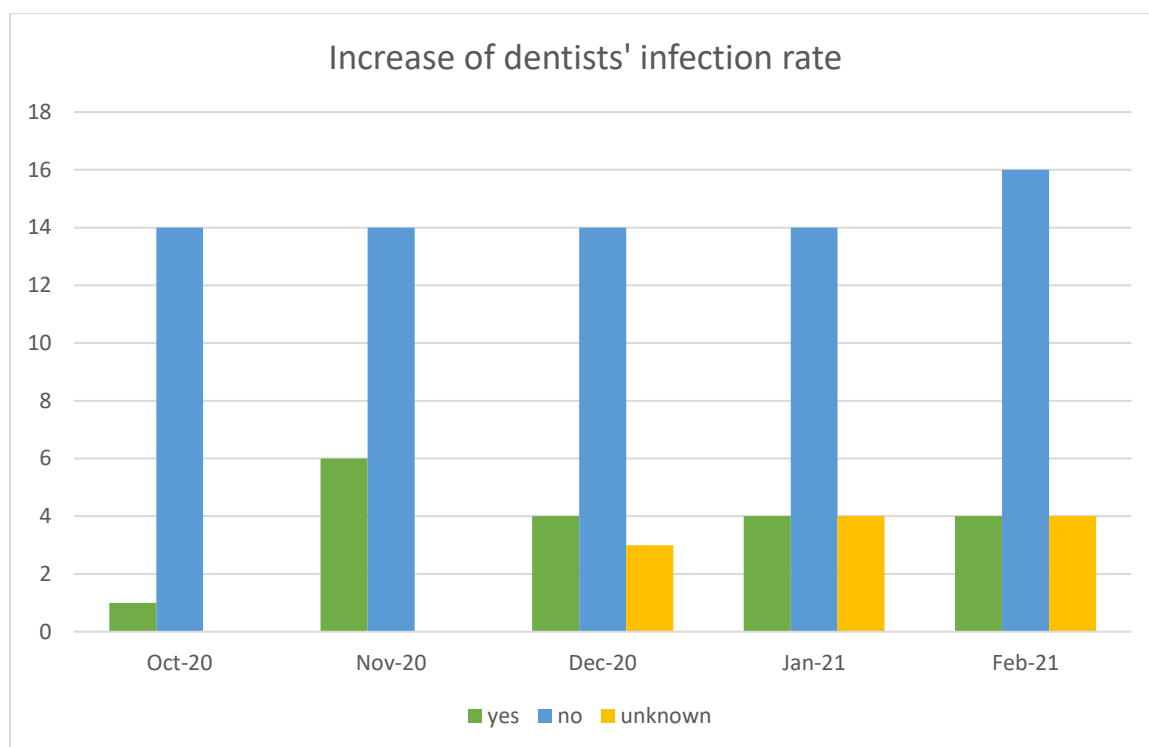


Figure 5. Increase of European dentists' COVID-19 infection rate from October 2020 to February 2021

III – CED CONTRIBUTION AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

During the year of the pandemic, the CED work focused on COVID-19 and its impact on dentistry.

Throughout these months, the CED has shared the results of the 19 surveys on COVID-19 with its members, as well as relevant updates, scientific articles and national recommendations. Moreover, we organised webinars, roundtables and debates that flagged challenges and came up with approaches to fight the pandemic.

The CED webinar on Italian dentists' response to COVID-19, organised on 19 March 2020 and moderated by the CED President, Marco Landi, who was personally involved in the first outbreak of COVID-19 in Codogno, Italy, gathered 110 participants from CED member associations. The direct experience, as President of the local Dental Chamber in Lodi, in organising dentists in the so-called “red zone” was helpful in foreseeing similar scenarios in other EU countries.

The CED 2020 Annual Report entitled “Dentists on the front lines of COVID-19” summarises the efforts to ensure a continuous provision of dental care during the pandemic. The main CED policy documents and press releases produced in 2020 focus on patient safety and effective dental education during the pandemic.

In its press release “European dentists in the fight against COVID-19”² from 24 March 2020, the CED outlined dentists' contribution to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus disease, while still providing safe and high-quality treatment to their patients, in line with relevant national and local regulations.

Several other press releases were published in the following months, some in collaboration with European health professionals and their students' organisations, such as the one from 27 March 2020 calling on the European Commission and the governments to support and

² https://cedentists.eu/index.php?option=com_newsletter&view=newsletter&id=212&tmpl=newsletter

protect healthcare professionals fighting COVID-19³. “Dentistry’s safety in times of COVID-19”⁴ press release published in November 2020 expressed CED’s concerns on the potential hindering of oral and general health of all Europeans by the recent increase in COVID-19 cases and recommended the continuity of dental care services provision during the pandemic.

During its General Meeting (GM) in November 2020, a significant part of the discussion focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on dentistry. Consequently, the GM adopted the CED statement “Dentistry and patient safety during the COVID-19 pandemic”⁵ which recommends that oral care, including not only urgent and essential dental treatment but also routine care should be considered as essential healthcare and should not be postponed until the COVID-19 pandemic is resolved. Moreover, the GM adopted the statement “Safe and effective dental education during the COVID-19 pandemic”⁶ which was co-signed by the European Dental Students’ Association. With this statement, the CED raised awareness on the disruptions to dental education caused by the ongoing public health crisis, as well as suggested measures to be taken to safeguard the shaping of the future dentists.

In addition to the documents produced internally, the CED reviewed and successfully contributed to suggestions and recommendations drafted by European healthcare bodies and associations, such as the European Commission (EC) and European Parliament (EP), the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and Cochrane Oral Health.

In April 2020, the CED has sent letters to the European Commissioner for Health, Stella Kyriakides and the European Commissioner for the Economy, Paolo Gentiloni, as well as to the President of the EP, David Sassoli, regarding the economic consequences of COVID-19 crisis for European dentists which could lead to closure of dental practices and have catastrophic long term impact on oral health in the EU. In May 2020 the CED has received replies to its letter from the President of the EC and the European Commissioner for the Economy, welcoming the EU’s fiscal measures and liquidity support to address the pandemic and the massive recovery and reconstruction package to be financed by an increased long-term budget (MFF).

In addition, the CED sent a letter to ECDC in April 2020, commenting on the ECDC “Technical Report on COVID-19 infection prevention and control for primary care, including general practitioner practices, dental clinics and pharmacy settings”. The comments were taken into account in the version published on 9 June 2020⁷. Moreover, the first update of the Technical Report, published in October 2020⁸, took into account additional comments made by the CED on the previous version of the document.

The CED contributed to the “Recommendations for the re-opening of dental services: a rapid review of international sources” published by Cochrane Oral Health and updated on 16 May 2020. Moreover, the CED Board reviewed Cochrane’s review of aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) in international guidance documents, published in July 2020. The Board recommended to try clarifying the role of AGPs in dentistry, its infectiousness and risk, and try to relate it to the number of infected dentists compared to the other health professionals.

V – CONCLUSIONS

³ https://cedentists.eu/index.php?option=com_newsletter&view=newsletter&id=214&tmpl=newsletter

⁴ https://cedentists.eu/index.php?option=com_newsletter&view=newsletter&id=223&tmpl=newsletter

⁵ <https://cedentists.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?id=4765>

⁶ <https://cedentists.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?id=4766>

⁷ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/Infection-prevention-and-control-primary-care-dental-pharmacies.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/covid-19-infection-prevention-and-control-primary-care>

The survey results and extensive work on COVID-19 are the basis of CED's lessons learned on dentistry in times of serious health threats. Based on the collected experience and evidence, the CED concluded the following:

- Evidence shows that dentistry is safe for dental patients, the dental team and dentists themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. The effective patient safety and infection control protocols in dental settings prevent additional infection risks, increasing the confidence to return to dental practices.
- It is of outmost importance that dental practices have access to appropriate personal protective equipment at all times. Under these circumstances, it is crucial that the price of PPE do not constitute an additional financial burden for the dental team and sufficient equipment is available for dentists to conduct their activity.
- It is essential that cross-border health threats do not disrupt the continuity of provision of dental care. Oral care, including routine check-ups, dental cleaning and prevention, are essential healthcare. Postponing dental treatments has negative impact on patients' oral and general health and creates or exacerbates oral health inequalities.
- It is crucial that dentists receive government support in extraordinary cases of work disruption, such as pandemics and other serious health threats, because of the significant potential economic burden.
- Dentists are essential healthcare workers and it is paramount that they are prioritised, alongside other healthcare professionals, to receive the COVID-19 vaccine.
- The CED encourages dentists to get vaccinated, as builders of public trust. Dentists have a key-role in helping promote vaccination against COVID-19 among the general public.
