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Where masks cannot suppress smiles

Mike Kinney For The Star-Ledger

Dr. Cavan Brunsden dons the plastic face shield that is now required coronavirus haberdashery and stares unflinchingly — and even with a playful twinkle — into the eyes of the “new normal” of his pediatric dental practice.

No surprise there, though, because Brunsden always had kind of a funny way of looking at the old normal.

Just ask any of the thousands of young dental and orthodontic patients or the other 54 employees of KidZdent, the Old Bridge dental practice where Brunsden is CEO.

This office was always about finding the fun and comfort in one of the most archetypically unpleasant experiences on earth — dental work. Ouch!

For more than 30 years, KidZdent has stood at the wonderfully weird intersection between one of the most daunting environments known to childhood and the happiest place on earth. That means storytimes and pajama parties; staff members who dress as princesses and comic heroes; and puppet shows that help special-needs children learn the proper steps of dental hygiene or reduce worries over a cavity fill.

“I have an extensive background in child psychology and I taught elementary school for five years before dentistry,” Brunsden said. “And when I became a pediatric dentist, it was quite natural for me to create an environment based on the psychological needs of young children. It’s a very different perspective that I have than most others.”

But what of that perspective in these social-distancing, oh-so-discomforting days of the coronavirus pandemic?

Despite the extensive new guidelines and restrictions put in place for all nonessential operations, Brunsden’s once bustling and bubbly practice is determined to still mine the merriment in oral health as it continues the mission of providing safe, effective dental care for children and adolescents.

“We’re calling it our Smile Safe initiative, and we’re already getting a lot of positive feedback from patients and their parents,” said Jessica Schirripa, KidZdent’s marketing director.

Like all other dental facilities in the state, KidZdent was open only for emergency procedures from March 15, when quarantine orders were first implemented by Gov. Phil Murphy, up to about three weeks ago, when the first stage of his reopening plan allowed for dental and orthodontic treatment. As of Thursday, patients could once again come in for preventative hygiene visits. They were greeted by the same friendly staffers as before, though now dressed almost head-to-toe in intimidating personal protective equipment.

“We understand this is a very confusing time for kids,” Schirripa said. “But we’re stressing hardcore that there are still smiles underneath the masks.”

The transformation from up close and personal to more closed and preventative has required a great deal of extra planning and coordination for every KidZdent associate. But Brunsden is happy to report that all are aboard the toothbrush carousel.

“This challenge has brought my whole team to the highest level of performance. It’s amazing to watch,” he said. “Everybody is so pumped to fix things, make things better, meet the challenges and be a shining brand-new example to the world around us on how we can conquer everything that’s just been thrown at us and make it work.”

“As tough as it is, we’re not sitting back and crying about it. I went through the AIDS crisis when dentistry was shut down ... and it’s very similar to what’s happening now.”

Brunsdon not only knows a crisis when he sees one (his practice also weathered Zika, SARS and several other health scares), but he and his team are well versed in quelling the minor crises many of his patients endure just for leaving the security of their homes.

“We’re probably the (state’s) largest dental provider to autistic children. We have over 3,000 autistic patients; we turn no one away,” he said. “We have developed delivery systems for every type of disability you can think of.”

For example, Brunsden has produced a storybook video that can help special-needs children familiarize themselves with the intricacies of the office.

The coronavirus pandemic, however,



The staff of KidZdent in Old Bridge in pre-coronavirus times. Courtesy photo

brings new challenges.

“The initial shutdown bothered our profession immensely, especially since we have had absolutely no disease transmission from practice to patient or patient to patient in the history of dentistry that we’re aware of,” Brunsden said. “That’s because we’ve always practiced incredibly high-end PPE. We’ve always used it and we treat every patient as if they’re carrying an infectious disease.”

As secure as Brunsden already is in the health and safety elements of his facility, he took increased measures that would engender the same confidence in others.

His practice installed new hospital-grade air filtration and purification and water filtration systems. They are disinfecting every space in between patients and announcing to the next patient that the area they will be entering has been completely sanitized.

“With the original early numbers (of infections) that were predicted, we tooled up for a lifetime profession in dealing with that level

crisis,” he said. “Which is why a lot of practices went way above the current CDC guidelines so as to be prepared for what was predicted to be a very, very virulent pandemic.”

But what about the emotional preparedness for a business that has long thrived upon its friendly, caring interactions with a rather vulnerable clientele? How do you maintain that warm, fuzzy feeling and good humor with all those barriers now in place?

“Everything is going more high-tech and we’re hoping to capitalize upon the use of technology to create a new relationship,” he said. “But the real key is face to face with the child. How do we now go from this newly created, totally sterile environment, and how do we get that child to look at us and be at peace and be comforted and know they are in a safe place?”

“And that’s going to be a huge challenge for us. We feel we have overcome the disease portion of this and the social portion, but now there’s this.”

SPONSOR CONTENT

Employers facing new challenges as NJ reopens

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to suppress business on Main Street, many employers in the state have maintained operations consistent with public health orders by accommodating employees with telework and other work-from-home arrangements and by reducing on site staff to the minimal number necessary to ensure continuation of critical operations.

Almost all EANJ survey employer-respondents have maintained operations through the pandemic and most - 63% - have not furloughed workers, although four in ten were forced to reduce workers’ hours. Over 70% have people working from home and all have taken on site safety precautions consistent with public health advisories such as providing personal protective equipment and assigning work tasks consistent with distancing guidelines.

Many now are planning for a re-integration of the workforce and operating at full capacity. But with less than five percent of state residents tested for COVID-19 and with a positivity rate close to 17 in 1,000, employers require a phased-in approach. Indeed, one of the biggest concerns is whether employees will feel confident and safe enough to return to work. Employers are expected to make their best efforts to obtain public health advice that is contemporaneous and appropriate for their location, and to make reasonable assessments of conditions in their workplace based on this information. Over 60

percent of employer-respondents say that keeping up with medical and legal information is a big concern. To keep its members updated, EANJ offers Return to Work Resources on its website, eanj.org.

Keeping the Workplace Safe

Among the standards that employers are required to follow are those issued by the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). Depending on a risk assessment, employers minimize face-to-face contact, communicate the availability of medical screening or other worker health resources such as telemedicine, implement procedures for safe and proper work, make sure sick workers stay home and establish alternating days or extra shifts that reduce the total number of employees in a facility at a given time.

Additionally, once an employer learns an employee has contracted COVID-19 it should ask the employee how s/he contracted the illness; inquire into the employee’s work and out-of-work activities without violating the employee’s personal privacy; and examine the employee’s work environment for potential viral exposure.

Workers’ Compensation Liability

Nearly all employers are required to have



workers’ compensation insurance that provides medical treatment, wage replacement, and permanent disability compensation to employees who suffer job-related injuries or illnesses that arising out of and in the course of employment. Some workers who test positive for COVID-19 after reporting to work would need evidence that their illness was caused at work to make a legitimate insurance claim. But in any case, the claim would be denied if the employee willfully failed to make use of a reasonable and proper personal protective devices furnished by the employer and the employer has clearly made this a requirement of employment and has uniformly enforced this rule.

Medical Screening

Employers may not select employees for return based upon any considerations of risk for COVID-19. However, employers may use medical screening consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Such screening would be job-related and consistent with business necessity based on the pandemic. 43 percent of EANJ employer-respondents plan on administering some form COVID-19 screening. In addition to taking an employee’s temperature, screening may consist of asking an employee the following questions:

- Do you have a temperature of 100.4 Fahrenheit or greater?

- Do you have a cough?
- Are you experiencing shortness of breath?
- Are you having difficulty breathing?
- Are you experiencing unusual fatigue?

Employees who appear to have symptoms upon arrival at work or who become sick during the day should immediately be separated from other employees, customers, and visitors and sent home. If an employee is confirmed to have COVID-19 infection, employers should inform fellow employees of their possible exposure to COVID-19 in the workplace.

More information on the reopening of NJ business from an employer’s perspective can be found at eanj.org. Visit our site to learn more about how EANJ helps its employer members navigate the challenges of the reintegration in a post-COVID-19 workplace.

