

Third Nationwide Impact and Response Survey of Optometry Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the care doctors of optometry provide and that which patients require and seek. This report describes new self-reported provider data acquired from a third COVID-19 survey conducted by the American Optometric Association's (AOA) Health Policy Institute (HPI), with comparisons made against two previous HPI COVID-19 surveys.

Highlights:

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- *31% of optometry practices report not being able to maintain the recommended supply of N95 or KN95 masks.*
 - *12% increase reported in overhead costs since the pandemic began.*
 - *+300% increase in doctors reporting that they or their staff had been diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19 (During a three-month period (June to September).*
 - *69% of patients communicating concerns about coming into the practice for appointments.*
 - *66% of doctors continue to have concerns about their and staff personal safety.*
 - *43% of doctors have noticed a health decline in their patients with chronic conditions due to the lack of regular care since the pandemic.*
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At the height of the pandemic restrictions and “shutdowns” in April 2020, 92% of doctors of optometry surveyed reported they were seeing less than 25% of their pre-pandemic patient volume. Since that time a rebound has occurred as states eased restrictions and practices have reopened, but only 58% of doctors of optometry surveyed in September report patient volumes have increased to more than 75% of pre-pandemic patient volumes. Thirty-four percent of doctors of optometry report patient volumes of 50-75% of pre-pandemic levels, and 8% reported patient volumes are still less than 50% of pre-pandemic patient volumes. Only 35% of responding doctors of optometry expect patient volumes to increase to more than 90% of their pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2020. Doctors who reported their patient volumes were between 50-75% of pre-pandemic levels were more likely to say they expected patient volume to increase to more than 90% this year (38%) than doctors still seeing less than 50% of pre-pandemic patient volumes (11%).

HPI launched a second follow-up to the April pandemic impact survey to assess how doctors of optometry are continuing to care for their patients while meeting CDC recommendations for personal protection equipment (PPE) and to assess challenges they are facing as they reopen their practices. HPI was the first organization to look at the impact the pandemic has had on the doctor of optometry's ability to remain engaged in and provide frontline care to patients in need since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) provided guidance on postponing some dental and vision care. All three surveys were designed to collect evidence regarding how doctors of optometry relieved stress on emergency departments and maintained accessibility throughout the pandemic, explore how optometry practices are affected, and to understand how the pandemic continues to impact doctors of optometry, their staff and patients. This second follow up survey (Survey 3) was distributed on August 24, 2020 and survey collection closed on September 25, 2020.

Doctors of optometry participating in the September survey reported currently seeing 2.3 patients per hour, on average. Doctors who reported current patient volume less than 25% of pre-pandemic levels averaged 0.48 patients/hour and those whose patient volumes were 25-50% report seeing, on average 0.9 patients/hour. Doctors whose patient volumes were between 50% and 75% reported seeing, on average, 1.6 patients/hour and those whose volumes were more than 75% reported an average of 2.9 patients/hour. Among those doctors who expect patient volumes to increase to more than 90% by the end of 2020, 38% reported seeing one patient or less per hour, 60% reporting seeing more than one patient but less than two patients per hour and two percent reporting seeing three or more patients per hour.

Ninety percent of doctors responding to the September survey were providing patient care through modified or normal practice hours, an increase from only 27% of doctors responding to the April survey, and consistent with June respondents (92%). Forty five percent of doctors are currently providing essential optometric care, up from 32% in April, and 46% of doctors are providing emergency or urgent care. Doctors of optometry estimated, on average, that 53% of patients seen for essential/ urgent or emergency care would have otherwise sought care at an emergency department or other setting had the doctor not been providing this care, down from 60%+ during the first peak of the pandemic.

Thirty-six percent of doctors surveyed in September were recalling furloughed or laid-off employees and 19% of doctors said their furloughed or laid-off employees are not wanting to return to the practice. Three percent of responding doctors indicate they had to close their practice indefinitely due to the pandemic. Responses describe that 19% of doctors continue to report inadequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE), a decrease from 30% reporting inadequate supplies of PPE in June.

Two-thirds of doctors of optometry (66%) responding to the September survey report that they or their staff continue to have concerns about their personal safety, a slight increase from 63% of doctors who reported personal safety concerns on the June survey. Fifty-seven percent of doctors continue to report having personally taken a reduction in income to protect the practice, a decrease of 14 percentage points from June (71%). Thirty-nine percent of September respondents report they have treated patients who were diagnosed with or tested positive for COVID-19, a 117% increase from only 18% of doctors in June. Five percent of doctors report that they or another doctor in the practice has been diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19 and one in five doctors (20%) reported their staff has been diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19. These percentages are up over 300% from doctors reporting in June that they or their staff had been diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19 (8%).

As pandemic restrictions were being lifted or reinstated in September, one in three doctors (33%) had staff resign or fail to return to work due to the added stress of safely providing patient care during the pandemic. Thirty-three percent of doctors also report finding it difficult to reschedule appointments and 73% of doctors report a waitlist for scheduling. Sixty-nine percent of doctors said their patients are communicating concerns about coming into the practice for appointments and 43% of doctors have noticed a health decline in their patients with chronic conditions due to the lack of regular care since the pandemic. Eighty-three percent of doctors noticed an increase in patient complaints about vision problems related to extended screen time/computer use. Fifteen percent of doctors have also noticed patients suffering more eye injuries/chemical burns from cleaning and sanitization products and 19% of doctors have noticed more patients with eye injuries from failure to wear safety eyewear.

Ninety-two percent of doctors are currently performing contact lens fittings/trainings in the practice, an increase from only 83% of doctors participating in the June survey. Among the 8% of doctors not currently providing contact lens fitting/trainings, 6% said they don't normally provide contact lens services and 2% said they are not performing contact lens fittings/trainings because of safety issues with patients having increased eye contact during the pandemic. One in three doctors surveyed (33%) reported an increase in inaccurate or incorrect contact lens prescription verifications during the pandemic. Nearly all doctors reporting an increase in contact lens verification issues (90%) say the errors were attributed to invalid prescriptions, and two-thirds of doctors (66%) report verifications were for the wrong prescription. Fifty-five percent of doctors reported receiving contact lens verifications for patients that were not theirs and 13% of doctors reported other verification issues including:

- verifications for patients who ordered contact lenses from a third-party vendor after an online vision test;
- verifications that patient did not initiate;
- verification calls between one and four in the morning;
- verifications for expired prescriptions.

Twenty-five percent of surveyed doctors report they continue to provide clinical care through telehealth services, the same percentage as reported on the June survey. These doctors expect that an average of 6% of care they provide moving forward will continue to be provided through telehealth services. Three percent of these doctors expect none of the care they provide moving forward will be through telehealth services, 33% expect one percent or less of the care they provide moving forward to be through telehealth, 10% expect two percent of the care they provide moving forward to be telehealth, 32% expect five percent of care moving forward to be telehealth, and 17% of doctors expect 10% or more of the care they provide moving forward to be delivered by telehealth services. More than half of doctors indicate they are using telehealth services for established patients only and 45% are using telehealth for both established and new patients.

One in five doctors of optometry (20%) report an increase in foreign body removals and 8% report an increase in other minor surgical procedures since the pandemic. Forty-three percent of doctors noticed more frequent patient complaints and/or showing signs of vision problems related to stress or anxiety compared to pre-pandemic and 46% report similar frequency in vision problems related to stress or anxiety as before the pandemic. Sixty percent of doctors report patients' anxiety/stress levels are much higher during the pandemic when coming in for an appointment than pre-pandemic and 31% report

similar patient anxiety/stress levels as before the pandemic. Vision problems doctors reported seeing that may likely have emanated from, or been exasperated by stress/anxiety levels were:

- 28% dry eye;
- 27% headache/migraine;
- 23% eye fatigue/strain;
- 18% blurred vision;
- 14% accommodative disorders;
- 13% computer vision syndrome;
- 6% eye twitch;
- 3% asthenopia;
- 2% hordeolum; and
- 2% increase in herpes and/or zoster.

Fifty-four percent of responding doctors say these vision problems due to anxiety/stress are not consistent with vision problems usually seen from anxiety/stress levels, while the remaining 46% said these problems are consistent with pre-pandemic anxiety/stress-related vision problems.

Recommendations for providing patient care during the pandemic call for the maintenance of a 30-day supply of PPE. Like reports from June, most doctors responding to the September survey can maintain this level of inventory for each category of PPE except gowns where only 37% of doctors say they are able to maintain a 30-day supply. Eighty eight percent of doctors are able to maintain adequate supply of gloves, 80% are able to maintain office cleaning/sanitizing supplies; 77% are maintaining 30-day supply of goggles, safety glasses or face shields; and 69% of doctors are able to maintain the recommended supply of N95 or KN95 masks. Concerns about the authenticity of PPE materials was reported by 49% of all respondents.

Doctors of optometry are experiencing unexpected increased costs of delivering patient care during the pandemic. Nearly all doctors responding to the September survey (96%) reported increased costs for cleaning/sanitization of the practice; 91% have increased costs for masks/shields; and 74% report increased costs for gloves. Additional reported increased costs include:

- 68% increased staff time for patient intake;
- 64% increased staff (or contractor) time for office/equipment cleaning;
- 35% increased staff time for administration such as insurance verification or collections;
- 23% increased costs for goggles;
- 20% additional staff members; and
- 10% additional benefits for staff.

Doctors reported on average an increase in overhead costs of 12% since the pandemic. Eleven percent of doctors indicated their overhead costs increased by 2% or less, 58% reported overhead costs have increased 5-15% and 12% of responding doctors say overhead costs have increased by 20% or more since the pandemic. Doctors of optometry report they have already or anticipate retaining permanent changes to their practice after the pandemic is over. These permanent changes include cleaning/sanitization procedures, changes in patient in-take, contactless patient check-in, continued use of masks and gloves and fewer patients allowed in the waiting room.

The HPI *Third Survey of Nationwide Pandemic Impact on Optometry Practices* opened on August 24, 2020 and closed September 25, 2020 with a total of 685 responses from doctors of optometry in all 50 states. These data are limited only by the fact that they represent self-reported data. Ninety-eight percent of respondents were practicing doctors of optometry, with 67% of these respondents being an owner of the optometry practice. Nineteen percent of practicing doctors were an employee within a practice, 8% were independent contractors and 7% percent were an associate within the practice. Eighty percent of total respondents said their optometry practice was not affiliated with a corporate or equity firm, franchise, large group or other organization that handles administrative and/or business operations for the practice. Ninety-seven percent of total respondents were current members of the AOA. Survey participants reported their practice consisted of, on average, four optometrists, one ophthalmologist and 11 paraoptometric staff.