



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

On June 4, 2020, the American Optometric Association's (AOA) Health Policy Institute (HPI) launched a 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. Both 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 were affected, and to understand how the pandemic continues to impact doctors of optometry, their staff and patients.

Results from the April survey showed that doctors of optometry were not only maintaining access to essential and emergency eye care for their patients during the height of the pandemic, but the majority were doing so despite reductions in staff and personal income. Timing of the June survey was strategically planned as nearly all respondents to the April survey indicated they planned to reopen their office after restrictions were lifted with the majority of doctors (58%) stating they would be reopening during the month of May. Additionally, 94% percent of April participants reported they would be reopening their practices differently from their pre-pandemic status and all expected a decrease in patient volume upon reopening. Ninety-two percent of June participants reported their office was open for normal or modified hours, an increase from 27% of April participants. Additionally, the percentage of doctors reporting they were not providing any patient care due to the pandemic decreased to 1.5% in June from 11% in April.

Fifty-five percent of June respondents continue to provide essential optometric care (surgical or non-surgical), up from 32% in April. A decrease in the percentage of doctors providing only emergent or urgent care (surgical or non-surgical) was seen with only 25% of current respondents reporting they are only providing this care in June compared to 53% of respondents in April.

Although 92% of doctors currently report normal or modified office hours, only 25% report current patient volume is more than 75% of pre-pandemic patient volume. Fifty-five percent of doctors said patient volume was 50-75% of pre-pandemic volume, 16% report patient volume at 25-50% and 4% of doctors reported less than 25% patient volume as compared to pre-pandemic levels. This is good news for patients and doctors alike considering only 8% of doctors reported patient volumes of more than 25% of their pre-pandemic volumes on the April survey. Doctors of optometry report seeing two patients per hour on average in June.

Seventy-one percent of doctors of optometry report having personally taken a reduction in income to protect the practice during the pandemic. In addition to the financial burden, 63% of doctors say they or their staff have concerns about their safety as they return to the office. Forty-nine percent of doctors are in the process of recalling furloughed or laid off employees and 19% indicated that their furloughed or laid off employees are not wanting or are able to return to the office. Less than a third of doctors (30%) report an inadequate supply of PPE, down from 55% in the original survey. Twenty percent of responding doctors of optometry continue to report an increase in foreign body removals and 8% have seen an increase in other in office minor surgical procedures. Twelve percent of surveyed doctors report that during the pandemic they have had to refer patients to another setting for care that they are trained to do but it is not allowed under their state license. Ninety-five percent of these doctors referred to an ophthalmologist, 21% referred to another health care professional, 13% referred these patients to an emergency department, and 5% referred patients to an urgent care center.

Nearly one out of five responding doctors of optometry (18%) have treated a patient who was diagnosed or tested positive for COVID-19 and 8% report they, or their staff, have been diagnosed or tested positive for the virus. This represents an increase since April where only 3% of doctors reported treating a COVID-19 patient and 2% indicated they or their staff tested positive.

One in four participants to the June survey reported an increase in inaccurate or incorrect contact lens verification calls with 89% percent of doctors reporting verification calls for an invalid prescription. Fifty-four percent of doctors were called for the wrong prescription, 43% received calls for someone who was not their patient and 17% reported “other” inaccuracies or errors which included expired prescriptions, substitutions and previous authorization given.

As pandemic restrictions are being lifted, and practices are seeing more patients, 71% of doctors report a waitlist for scheduling appointments and 27% of doctors are finding it difficult to reschedule previous appointments. Sixty-three percent of doctors reported patients are communicating concerns about coming into the office for appointments and 33% of doctors are continuing to use telehealth to decrease or eliminate the time in the office.

Three-fourths of doctors of optometry who typically provide vision therapy or vision rehabilitation services in their office are not currently providing this care. Among these doctors, 51% indicate concerns about close contact with the patient, 18% said this care takes too much time and staff commitment, 10% are not providing because of capacity limitations, 10% say providing this care currently is a financial burden on the practice, 8% have had no patients requiring this care and 3% of doctors are providing this care online.

A larger percentage of doctors of optometry (83%) reported they are currently performing contact lens fittings and training in the office. Among the 17% who are not currently providing contact lens fittings and training, the majority (76%) reported this is due to concerns about close contact. Fifteen percent are not currently providing this service because it requires too much office time, 5% report staff limitations and 1% of doctors reported there was currently limited or no patient demand for fittings and trainings currently.

Current recommendations for providing patient care during COVID-19 pandemic call for the maintenance of a 30-day supply of PPE. Eighty-six percent of responding doctors of optometry are currently able to maintain this supply of gloves, 82% can maintain this supply of office cleaning/ sanitizing supplies and 74%

are maintaining this level of goggles, safety glasses or face shields. Sixty percent of doctors say they are able to maintain a 30-day supply of N95 or KN95 masks and only 32% are able to maintain the recommended supply of gowns. Almost half of responding doctors indicated they have concerns about the authenticity of the PPE materials they are using.

Seventy-three percent of doctors reported receiving provider relief payment for HHS Medicare/ Medicaid, up from 70% reported on the April survey. A larger percentage of doctors also reported receiving each of the following relief payments compared to the April survey:

- Paycheck Protection Program (PPP)—82% currently received, up from 46%
- Medicare accelerated payment—30% currently received, up from 21%
- Economic Injury Disaster Loan Program (EIDL)—28% currently received up, from 15%
- Emergency Family Medical Leave (EFML)—3% currently received, up from 2%
- State government programs—8% currently received, up from 6%

Seventy-one percent of doctors report having received the most helpful information on re-opening their practice from the AOA or their state affiliate and 45% continue to receive the most helpful information on other issues related to the pandemic from the AOA or their state affiliate.

The HPI *Second Survey of Nationwide Pandemic Impact on Optometry Practices* opened on June 4, 2020, and closed June 18, 2020, with a total of 833 responses from doctors of optometry in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Ninety-eight percent of respondents were practicing doctors of optometry, with 67% of these respondents being an owner of the optometry practice. Twenty percent of practicing doctors were an employee within a practice, 6% were independent contractors and 5% were an associate within the practice. Seventy-nine 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, 3.4 optometrists and 8.3 paraoptometric staff.