Study shows concerning levels of dental patient aggression

By Dental Tribune International

NEW YORK, U.S.: When it comes to dealing with behavioral issues among dental patients, the most common obstacle that practitioners seek to overcome is patient anxiety. A new study out of the U.S., however, has suggested that levels of patient aggression toward dentists may be a greater problem than previously thought, signaling an addition to the myriad problems that dental professionals face when providing treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study was conducted by a team of researchers from the New York University College of Dentistry (NYU Dentistry), and is the first study to measure dental patient aggression levels in the U.S. The researchers surveyed 98 dentists who practice in the New York City metropolitan area, each of whom completed a confidential online questionnaire concerning whether or not they had experienced any of a list of 21 specific forms of aggressive behavior by their patients. Included on this list were types of physical abuse, such as pushing and kicking; verbal abuse, such as swearing; and reputational forms of abuse and aggression, such as lawsuit threats and detrimental comments on social media.

The surveys—which were conducted prior to the pandemic—showed that 55% of dentists reported having experienced verbal aggression from patients in the past year. Of the respondents, 44% had been the victims of reputational aggression from their patients, whereas 22% had been on the receiving end of some form of physical aggression. According to the research team, these rates of aggression were comparable with those reported in other health care settings across the U.S.

“Dentistry is rife with situations that can elicit strong negative emotions, such as fear, pain, distrust, and anger,” said Dr. Kimberly Rhoades, the study’s lead author and a researcher in the Family Translational Research Group at NYU Dentistry. “Many patients also experience high levels of anxiety and vulnerability, which may increase negative responses or aggression. Establishing that aggression toward dentists is a problem and how often it occurs can help us develop interventions to prevent aggression in dental practices.”

The researchers cautioned that a larger nationwide study would be necessary to better determine the prevalence of patient aggression in dental practices across the U.S., though they also recommended that practices consider incorporating such measures as aggression de-escalation training for staff members.

Dental students also likely to be victims of aggression

In a parallel study published earlier this year in the Journal of Dental Education, an NYU research team, also lead by Rhoades, found that a staggering 86% of dental students reported having been subjected to verbal aggression at the hands of patients during their clinical training. Of the students surveyed, 28% reported at least one instance of physical aggression, whereas 36% had been victims of some form of reputational aggression.

The first study, titled “Patient aggression toward dentists,” was published in the October 2020 issue of the Journal of the American Dental Association.

The second study, titled “Patient aggression toward dental students,” was published in the May 2020 issue of the Journal of Dental Education.