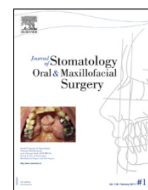




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Letter to the Editor

The double-edged sword of SARS-CoV-2 vs. market economy: a perspective of Brazilian dental providers



Dear Editor,

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In a well-documented set of guidelines, the French Society of Stomatology, Maxillo-facial Surgery and Oral Surgery has summarized recommendations for the adoption of efficient protocols of prevention for medical and non-medical practitioners specialized in oral health to protect themselves from coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The recommendations are based on the own experience of the society fellows and on reported guidelines from French normative agencies [1]. We fully agree with the contents of the document. However, we would like to exposed our perspective that the rise in the price of personal protective equipment (PPE) has negatively affected the activities of dental professionals, especially those who are on the front line against this terrible illness and those who have guaranteed oral care for individuals with oral diseases, particularly oral cancer.

In Brazil, the first case of COVID-19 caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) was reported in January 2020 [2]. Since then, this country has become an epicentre of COVID-19, with nearly five million affected individuals and more than 147,000 deaths in early October [3]. With an overwhelmed healthcare system, precautionary measures, including self-isolation, social distancing, lockdown strategies, and mask wearing mandates have been adopted to mitigate the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and to relieve overcrowded health facilities. As in other countries, the economic activity of Brazil has been affected sharply. Although some social policies and financial incentives have been introduced to alleviate the burden of the economic downturn, in the health field the negative impact of the disease has been dramatic, particularly in the Brazilian National Health System [4].

Worldwide, clinical practice in times of COVID-19 has been a matter of considerable concern among healthcare providers [5]. A study has reported that dentists accounted for 6% of the health care providers who succumbed to COVID-19, mainly due to the lack of PPE [6]. When the pandemic unfolded, the authorities in charge

were compelled to redefine protocols about the wearing of PPE. In April, the World Health Organization issued a document with recommendations for the rational use of PPE, endorsing the wearing of gown, gloves, face shield and N95 masks to prevent the spread of the infection among practitioners [7].

Considering the economic system based on private ownership of the means of production and their production for profit, worldwide competition is intense. Due to the increased demand for PPE during the pandemic, severe shortages have occurred and prices have skyrocketed. In Brazil, PPE has been sold at extortionate prices. Disposable face masks are currently being sold for an unfair price almost 10 times higher than the price set in place before the pandemic. Likewise, the prices of laboratory supplies for diagnosis and research on COVID-19 (e.g., tips, tubes and reagents, usually not manufactured in Brazil) have been deeply impacted and availability is scarce. Furthermore, an article in the prestigious *The New York Times* referred to advertisements of gallons of hand sanitizer, boxes of isolation gowns and, most importantly, N95 masks. All were being sold at much higher prices than normally paid in the US [8].

While some manufacturers will certainly achieve considerable margins of profit, much of the price increase is likely to spread across the supply chain. Thus, manufacturers should not take advantage of customers' desperation, avoiding exploitation and abuse. Indeed, the rise in PPE prices has negatively affected the activities of health professionals, especially dentists or anyone on the front line against this disease. As yet, the impact on research cannot be accurately estimated. The most sought-after product on the planet – face masks – appears to be one of the many points of contention in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflict of interest and source of funding

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