

Reopening practices need access to PPE, infection-control supplies

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What's the news: As physician practices reopen to address patient care that was delayed during the COVID-19 pandemic, steps must be taken to ensure that the extreme shortages of personal protection equipment (PPE), disinfectant and hand sanitizer previously experienced by front-line providers do not reoccur and spread to non-hospital settings.

“While it is critical to the long-term viability of these practices to return to seeing patients in person, the serious threat of COVID-19 infection persists, and it is essential that physicians and their staff institute proper infection-control procedures in their practices,” AMA CEO and Executive Vice President James L. Madara, MD, wrote in a letter to Vice President Mike Pence.

The AMA urges the administration to work with physicians to provide additional assistance in securing infection-control supplies.

Dr. Madara suggested that this could include creating a clearinghouse or providing listings of legitimate manufacturers or suppliers within each state or locality who could provide practices with PPE and other infection-control items. Another possibility would be to dedicate additional federal infection-control resources to help supply non-hospital-based physicians. The AMA is working with federal departments and agencies to determine how best to offer this assistance to physicians.

Why it's important: Following federal government guidance and state mandates, many practices were closed to non-urgent care for several weeks. Many states are beginning to lift restrictions on elective procedures and non-urgent appointments, so physicians across all specialties should soon be seeing patients in person—but supply shortages may block their ability to do so.

“We are hearing significant and growing concern from our member physicians that they cannot secure needed supplies to safely reopen and that they are unsure where to turn for further guidance and assistance,” Dr. Madara told Vice President Pence.

The health system's private practice infrastructure has been devastated by the pandemic. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that 243,000 jobs were lost from physician offices in April, adding to the 12,000 that were lost in March. To slow their reopening because of supply shortages would be another blow to these hard-hit practices.

“Infection within a physician practice runs the risk of not only spreading COVID-19 to additional staff and patients, but further threatens the long-term financial viability of practices already under significant strain after extended closures,” Dr. Madara wrote. “The sustainability of these practices is critical not only to addressing the pandemic but to the future health of the nation.”

To learn more: Read the AMA's guidance for reopening practices during the pandemic, and use the AMA checklist that has been developed to help physicians manage the safe reopening of their practices.