

The New Normal

■ LAUREL STOIMENOFF, PT, CHC

Since the COVID-19 pandemic took hold I have received multiple emails from every organization that I have done business with over the past decade. Each one at some point uses “unprecedented times” in the narrative. As time progresses and we transition from *hunkering down* to *easing up*, we are seeing the ubiquitous *unprecedented* replaced by *the new normal*.

Members have been reaching out to ask or hypothesize on what the new normal will be. No matter what, all seem to agree that it will indeed be *new* and urgent care BC (before COVID) is forever changed. Patients will undoubtedly return. We are already seeing it in our weekly surveys. But will they return at a traffic trajectory needed to support the costs of operating a bricks-and-mortar operation? Urgent care centers are already responding.

Here are just a few humble predictions.

- The relaxation of telemedicine payment criteria in response to the pandemic will reverse somewhat, but not to its prior levels. Urgent care centers will continue to implement and refine their telehealth capabilities to respond to an uptick in consumer acceptance, facilitate load balancing across sites, and supplement revenue.
- The value-based care model will gain greater traction as owners and operators seek opportunities to replace a portion of their revenue with a stable, non-volume-dependent source.
- Environmental modifications and heightened infection control procedures, not unlike those being implemented by hotels, including social distancing, will be needed to ensure patients feel safe to return. A survey of 500 U.S. consumers conducted by Sage Growth Partners and Black Book Market Research assessed consumer concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ It found that 21% of respondents felt unsafe and 39% were unsure if they felt safe in an urgent care center. In response, urgent care centers



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are re-evaluating policies and procedures and will sharpen marketing messages to emphasize quality, cleanliness, and patient safety.

- Pharmacies and pharmacists will become new competitors as state regulators and government payers seek to increase care delivery and immunization sites in response to a perceived need and strong retail lobbying efforts.
- UCCs and UCA will proactively plan for what’s next, including increased testing, screening, and immunizing, if and when a COVID-19 vaccine becomes available. The pandemic inspired the industry to coalesce as never seen before. The unified voice and heightened collegiality that manifested will be essential as we emerge from this crisis.

These are merely speculations. The future has yet to be written. We need to work together to ensure urgent care centers are well positioned as essential healthcare destinations.

UCA2020 On-Demand Can Help

UCA has modified what was to be our live convention education schedule as we now bring it to you on-demand. It will include thought-provoking content to help you emerge successful as we enter the new normal. Hear from experts and healthcare prognosticators, including Zeev Neuwirth, MD, author of *Reframing Healthcare*, as part of UCA2020 On-Demand. We are working to support the urgent care heroes who not only have to respond clinically but also navigate payment, financial relief, and other administrative hurdles where the rules are being written as the game is played.

Register at www.ucaoa.org/Convention. ■

Reference

1. Sage Growth Partners. COVID-19 Market Pulse. As the country reopens, anxiety and safety concerns arise. Available at: <http://go.sage-growth.com/covid-19-market-report>. Accessed May 6, 2020.