



The COVID-19 Crisis: QualDerm Helps Affiliated Practices Successfully Navigate a Global Pandemic

*Pro-active Leadership and Commitment to True PartnershipSM
Results in Maximized Quality, Safety and Patient Access*

Navigating a Crisis

For years, physicians have been burdened with increasing federal mandates and practice management duties. The COVID-19 crisis added an entirely new dimension to those challenges.

As the pandemic spread, information changed moment-to-moment. A variety of orders and guidelines were issued both from local and federal authorities and the US population was categorized into essential and non-essential roles. Dermatologists were in a gray area, and left to decipher how to best care for their patients safely and keep their practices and employees financially stable.

Evidence-based Decisions

As early case counts began to rise, QualDerm leadership quickly shifted its attention to the impending crisis. The Chief Medical Officer, John Albertini, MD, immediately initiated research and began developing COVID-19 guidelines and policies for the organization. Dr. Albertini called upon QualDerm's physician-led Quality Council to review, edit and approve the recommendations as well as to generate additional ideas for how to manage the situation. The recommendations were then vetted by the Regional Joint Operating Committees to ensure the new guidelines and policies were applicable at the local level.

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Physicians throughout the QualDerm network received daily CMO briefings at the beginning of the crisis. These communications provided the most up-to-date COVID-19 research, guidance on risk mitigation and recommended policies for how to best continue patient care. Regular communications were also sent to all QualDerm employees to provide reliable, evidence-based information about the virus and transparency for how the organization was managing the crisis.

“The evidence-based information we got from QualDerm helped quell the fear and uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic,” says John Zitelli, MD, a QualDerm-affiliated physician who practices at Zitelli & Brodland, PC, in Pennsylvania. “The daily updates and detailed guidelines helped us know exactly how to handle patients and staff as things were rapidly changing.”

Fortunately, QualDerm already had a physician leadership structure in place before the pandemic hit. The CMO, who worked directly with the QualDerm leadership team, shifted the majority of his time to focus on the organization's COVID-19 response. This allowed the organization to make decisions and address the situation in nearly real-time. Further, as restrictions on in-person appointments began to ease, the CMO, Quality Council and QualDerm leadership team worked together to develop a 48-point Safety-first Checklist to help affiliated practices transition through the reopening phase.

“As the CMO, I had protected time to work through all the CDC information and develop an action plan,” says John Albertini, MD, who practices at The Skin Surgery Center in North Carolina, and serves as QualDerm’s CMO. “This allowed physicians across the QualDerm network to react more quickly – much more so than practices who had to navigate the crisis on their own.”

As the pandemic evolved, the CMO and Quality Council continued their work, evaluating new information as it became available and enhancing guidelines and policies as needed. COVID-19 communications continued to be shared with all QualDerm physicians and employees on a regular basis.

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HR, IT, and PPE

Few areas of practice management were left unscathed during the pandemic. Dermatology practices were forced to contend with plummeting patient volumes, necessary staff furloughs and shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE). However, QualDerm-affiliated practices had the support of a team of experienced practice management professionals to help them weather the storm.

“The amount of work going on behind the scenes to keep the practices running was amazing,” says Deepa Lingam, MD, who practices at the Center for Surgical Dermatology and Dermatology Associates in Ohio, and serves on the QualDerm Quality Council. “This was such a difficult situation. But it would have been much worse if we weren’t part of the QualDerm network.”

Being part of a larger organization gives practices numerous benefits such as economies of scale and negotiating leverage. In this situation, QualDerm was able to secure the PPE its affiliated practices needed while many independent providers were left scrambling. Access to a dedicated IT staff is another advantage for QualDerm-affiliated practices.

At the onset of the crisis, QualDerm’s IT staff developed a strategy to implement a telehealth platform. Within two weeks, 85% of QualDerm’s partner providers were trained and caring for patients virtually. Approximately three months after implementation, QualDerm-affiliated practices had managed thousands of teledermatology visits. QualDerm’s quick action minimized disruption to patient care while protecting vulnerable patients, helped practices keep staff members working as much as possible and mitigated revenue loss.

Unfortunately, staff furloughs were still necessary at some practices. QualDerm’s HR team worked around the clock to determine how each of the network’s almost 700 employees would be impacted at the state and local levels if furloughed, and how staffing hours could be managed to benefit each employee. The HR team researched the process for employees to collect federal benefits and directly contacted states’ unemployment agencies to help affected employees navigate this unprecedented situation.

“QualDerm did all of the legwork for the necessary furlough process. I would have had to hire an attorney and an accountant to manage it, had it not been for QualDerm,” says Dr. Zitelli.

Maintaining employee morale – for both those still working and those who were furloughed – was of the utmost importance. QualDerm remained in constant communication with all employees to keep everyone apprised of the latest COVID-19 information, both from a clinical and a business standpoint. Furloughed employees received additional, personal communications via texts and handwritten notes from their Regional Operations Directors and practice physicians.

QualDerm also provided all employees access to free mental health counseling and set up a dedicated email account, health@qualderm.com, for employees to ask questions to and share ideas with the HR Director and CMO.

“I have heard nothing but gratitude from employees about the level of QualDerm’s assistance,” says Dr. Albertini. “I think the way QualDerm helped its employees during this unprecedented time could be the organization’s greatest legacy.”

Leadership and Listening

Over the years, QualDerm has earned a reputation for strong leadership and for seeking its physician partners’ input. During the pandemic, these characteristics remained front and center.

The leadership team began and ended each day with calls to discuss all things COVID related. These all-hands-on-deck calls allowed the team to get feedback from each regions’ Operations Director – hearing about challenges, successes, fears and updates on local developments. Physicians from across the network also joined these daily calls to listen and offer their professional perspectives. Additionally, during these calls best practices utilized in various practice locations were evaluated for implementation in other regions.

“When you are an independent practice owner, it can sometimes feel like you’re floating by yourself in the ocean,” says Dr. Zitelli. “QualDerm’s guidance provided us with a sense of security throughout the pandemic.”

Reassuring Patients

Survey Measures Patient Perception of Safety and Communication Efforts

Just because a practice’s doors are open, doesn’t mean patients are ready to venture back for an in-person dermatology appointment. To help patients feel more comfortable seeking care, QualDerm ramped up its patient communications efforts through e-newsletters and on social media platforms. These communications were customized for each practice and shared the enhanced COVID-19 safety protocols and other pertinent practice information.

QualDerm also surveyed patients to ensure our safety and communications efforts were having the intended effect. Over 6,000 patients responded, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive.

- **93% found our safety precautions appropriate and reassuring**
- **94% have confidence that the practice staff is knowledgeable about and will manage the new safety procedures well**
- **91% found the emails communicating our enhanced safety measures helpful and reassuring**
- **78% want us to continue sending communications on this topic**

Comments from the vast majority of patients expressed appreciation for and were comforted by our efforts.

QualDerm's partnership model has never taken a cookie-cutter approach. This carried through in QualDerm's pandemic response. As COVID-19's impact varied by region, and in some cases, by community, having a combination of in-market and corporate leadership working together allowed the organization to customize its response to best fit the practices' individual needs. By individualizing COVID-19 practice operation protocols, QualDerm was able to help its affiliated practices maximize quality, safety and patient access.

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"QualDerm was very receptive to our individual concerns and made changes specifically for our practice," says Dr. Lingam. "Plus, we now have protocols in place that we can implement quickly if something like this ever happens again."

The full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic may not be realized for years. While addressing immediate practice operational needs, the QualDerm leadership team is also developing and putting into place longer-term strategies to ensure the stability of the company and its affiliated practices.

"This crisis has galvanized the team to do its best work," says Dr. Albertini. "Patients, employees and the entire company will benefit for years to come because of the QualDerm leadership team's hard work and dedication."

About QualDerm Partners

QualDerm Partners helps top-tier dermatologists position their practices for sustainable growth and profitability. The company creates market-leading practice partnerships through affiliations and de novo development. QualDerm provides the management support, capital, and guidance for growth. Under QualDerm's True PartnershipSM model, physicians are partners, not employees, and retain their own practice brand. This doctor-driven model is designed to maintain physicians' clinical autonomy and ensure the highest-quality patient care. QualDerm offers physicians tailored partnership structures to meet their needs, as well as the option to sell their practices.

QualDerm currently has affiliated practices in North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, with plans to expand further. For more information, visit www.QualDerm.com.

Contact QualDerm to learn more about partnership opportunities or to discuss selling your practice.

QualDerm Partners
210 Jamestown Park Dr., Suite 250
Brentwood, TN 37027
info@qualderm.com
615.250.6723