A Year in Review:
COVID-19's impact on retinal practices

Julian Bell
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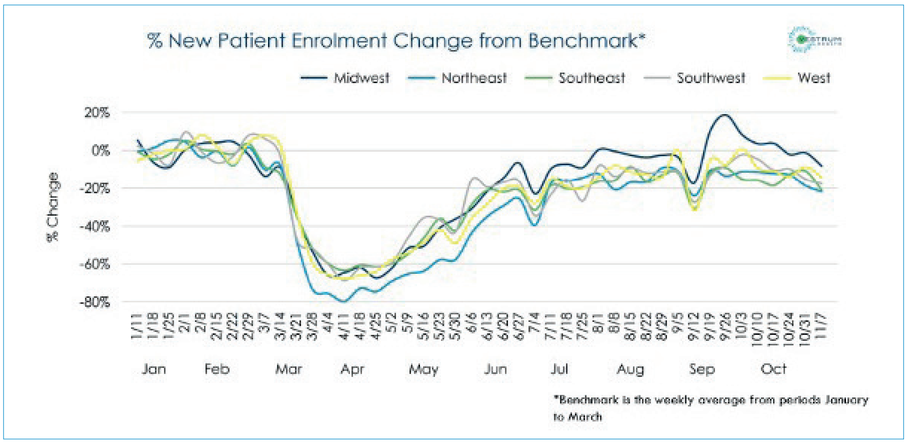
In December 2019, a novel coronavirus – locally confined to Wuhan, China – slowly began to creep into headlines world-wide. With the Chinese New Year imminent, there were concerns that it may spread, and, given its novelty, many were unsure of the ramifications at the outset. Highly contagious respiratory diseases had been successfully contained in the past, and with preexisting strategies in place, there was a level of confidence in managing an outbreak. As the virus spread, it became increasingly obvious that prior containment and management strategies were not effective, and that COVID-19 would have unprecedented and far-reaching economic and social impacts.

From December through the end of February 2020, our Quick Trends report was showing incredibly healthy trends for both Encounters and anti-VEGF Injections. While mirroring the trendline on Year-over-Year (YoY) data, both were well ahead of 2019 numbers.

In the first two weeks of March the initial calls for lockdowns or changes to socialization were broadcast. This had an immediate impact on practices across the nation; following March 14th a sudden and massive decline in Encounters and Injections (a "COVID-impact dip") is observed: Encounters decreased by 35% while Injections decreased by 21%. While there was a steady return following the initial impact of the drastic societal changes, numbers did not stabilize to YoY levels until roughly the end of May. From March 21 – May 23 there was an average YoY decline in Encounters of 37%, and 13% in Injections. Of course, this was succeeded by the Memorial Day weekend in which a predictive decline followed. Following this initial COVID-impact dip, there was an interesting return post-Memorial Day; from May 30 – October 3 Encounters average -3.1% and Injections average 2.5%. These values largely comprise marginal peaks and valleys throughout, with predictive declines and rebounds surrounding holidays (July 4th, Labor Day).



Similar trends are noted for percentage change in New Patient Enrollments as well. Prior to March 14th there is a healthy growth margin over 2019, however since this point new enrollments have not returned to positive values relative to 2019. Interestingly, the Midwest region does appear to be an outlier in this metric. While they were roughly equal to the average of new patient enrollment from the beginning of the new year to March 14th, they have climbed at a much more linear rate toward 2019 numbers, and are currently the only region close to 0% change (vs negative for all other regions). In fact, following the Labor Day weekend they saw a spike which brought them into positive YoY values for approximately one month. They are now following a steady decline like each other region. It is important to note that the Midwest has the highest percentage of new cases of COVID-19 by region nationally right now (36%) despite having approximately 1/5th of the country's population. They are also leading in hospitalizations at 35%. It may be inferred that the adherence of this population set to social distancing guidelines is the main contributing factor to this region seeing the highest New Patient Enrollment, as people are likely venturing out of their homes at a higher rate. This contrasts with the North East region who accounts for the lowest percentage (12%) of new national COVID-19 cases, with 11% of hospitalizations, and they are also averaging the lowest new patient enrollment changes by region.

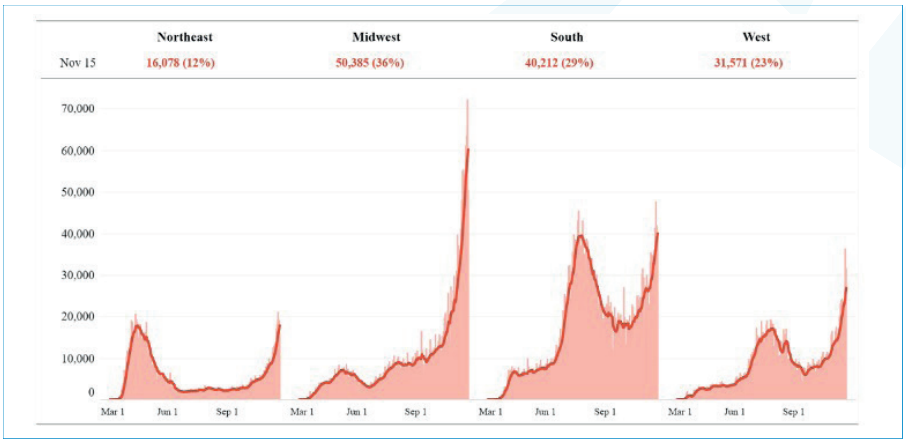


Image provided courtesy of The Atlantic: https://covidtracking.com/data/charts/regional-current-hospitalizations

What are potential outlooks as we approach the end of 2020 and move into 2021? With the Thanksgiving weekend quickly approaching, it is highly likely that there will be another dip leading into and following that weekend, followed by a rise closely approximating 2019 values. However, given the current exponential growth rate of COVID-19 cases nationally the country will likely be exceeding 200,000 new cases/day by the end of the month which may further inhibit growth. There may be a light at the end of the tunnel however, as two separate vaccines currently appear to be above 90% efficacy in late-stage trials. One is joint research between Pfizer and BioNTech, and the other is produced by Moderna. While we wait on peer review, this is certainly a reason to look to the new year with hope.

What type of changes are you making to your clinical and/or practice to facilitate ongoing patient services during the pandemic?

We would love to hear your feedback and include it as a potential contribution in our next article as we all do our best to help one another out during the pandemic.

If you're interested in contributing ideas, please contact us:

admin@vestrumhealth.com