

# Understanding The Impact Of Covid-19 On Oral Health, Dentistry And Post-Pandemic Resilience In Bahrain

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## **ABSTRACT**

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2021, Derasat and the UNDP assembled a group of some of the most respectable dentists and oral health experts in the Kingdom of Bahrain to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on oral health and dentistry, and what the post-pandemic resilience looks like for the orthodontist industry in Bahrain. This report highlights the major issues discussed during the roundtable and presents a series of recommendations targeting dentistry and policymakers.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2021, Derasat and the UNDP assembled a group of some of the most respectable dentists and oral health physicians in the Kingdom of Bahrain to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on oral health and dentistry, and what the post-pandemic resilience looks like for the orthodontist industry in Bahrain.

The main findings were as follows:

1. Teledentistry has been a focal point in engaging with patients through virtual platforms during Covid restrictions but did not suffice for emergency care or dental trauma.
2. NHRA made it acceptable for dentists to receive patients in need of emergency care during peak Covid-19.
3. Social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat helped in connecting with the patients, prompting clinics to a wider audience, and sharing videos of sanitization procedures – while Zoom aided in virtual consultations for patients.
4. Aerosol machines were utilized to purify the air in the room when dental procedures were being performed.
5. Online communication was emphasized in increasing collaborations with other colleagues in the field and spreading the Education of oral hygiene, particularly for pediatric oral health.
6. Applications that are medical-legally approved such as Doctori can be used more in Bahrain instead of Whatsapp for follow-ups with patients.
7. Reducing the number of patients in the procedures' room allowed the doctors to connect better with the patients, especially children, and teenagers. Additionally, restructuring the waiting area to maintain social distancing regulations.
8. Pre-assessments should be conducted for ordering PPE's, masks, the general stock of material, etc. to minimize last-minute shortages.
9. A contingency plan for reducing the working hours of doctors by around 25% was explored, in addition to forced annual leave.
10. The support of Tamkeen and the Government of Bahrain substantially aided the financial burden on dental clinics, in addition to no lockdowns being enforced on the kingdom.

Based on these findings, the discussion resulted in the following recommendations for dentists and policymakers:

1. Being proactive with health regulations such as masks, shoe covers, gloves, and face shields need to be implemented consistently.
2. Apply changes for the waiting area in clinics where patients and guardians can wait in the car, rather than in one room.
3. Policymakers should strategize a way to protect doctors legally from giving their advice online or via social media platforms, as wrong advice is treated as a criminal offense rather than a civil offense.
4. The dentist community must create an emergency plan for future pandemics including a consistent stock of PPE's (personal protective equipment).
5. Putting more emphasis on businesses saving money for crisis management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The novel Coronavirus disease has had a significant impact on healthcare facilities all over the world, in all the medical industries. The dental industry was one of the hardest-hit health sectors during Covid-19. Recently, in late November 2021, the latest variant of the SARS-COV-2, the “Omicron” variant, has been spreading exponentially and is a challenge amidst the actions to build a post-covid resilient world. However, the dental industry in Bahrain has thoroughly taken its precautions and learned from the challenges that they encountered during the Covid-19 pandemic last year.

The Kingdom of Bahrain has recorded around 280,000 cases and 1,394 deaths and 276,000 recoveries from the Coronavirus hitherto. Tight restrictions, precautionary measures, closure of schools, working remotely, were some of the solutions that were implemented in Bahrain to combat the spread of the virus from March until September 2020. However, restrictions and regulations began to ease during 2021 in the Kingdom of Bahrain. Moreover, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 2021, the Ministry of Health made it eligible for individuals holding a yellow shield in the “BeAware” application to receive their Covid-19 booster shot without an appointment message.

According to the 2020 Annual Report by the NHRA, there are a total of 17,043 medical professionals licensed in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and a total of 955 of them are dental professionals. With the cooperation of the NHRA and the regulations set forth by the Ministry of Health, the dental professionals in Bahrain were able to navigate through the calamities of the pandemic, manage to keep their business afloat and take in patients while navigating through the mandatory Covid-19 measures.

Furthermore, the Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bahrain launched a partnership to evaluate the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 in the Kingdom of Bahrain. The joint efforts of Derasat and the UNDP organized a closed roundtable event to examine the impact of Covid-19 on Oral Health, Dentistry, and Post-Pandemic Resilience in Bahrain. The roundtable hosted several established doctors and healthcare professionals in the kingdom, in which they discussed and answered a series of questions throughout the two-hour event. This report is a summary of the roundtable discussions with healthcare professionals and doctors in Bahrain. It includes the questions, discussions, and recommendations targeting dentists and policymakers made by the participants.

## 2. ROUNDTABLE FORMAT

The Derasat-UNDP Bahrain partnership aimed to examine the impact of Covid-19 on Oral Health, Dentistry, and Post-Pandemic Resilience in Bahrain and bring together a variety of constituencies to a closed roundtable discussion. The project sought to highlight the insight and personal experience of health care experts in the dental field. A roundtable format allowed all the participants to share personal anecdotes and challenges during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic and allowed the space for a lively, fruitful discussion.

Despite the ongoing challenges faced during the pandemic, the discussion was conducted in Derasat Headquarters on the morning of Tuesday, December 23rd. After brief opening remarks made by Dr. Hamad Ebrahim Al-Abdulla, Executive Director of Derasat, and the Acting Head of Office of UNDP Bahrain, Ms. Aikan Mukanbetova, the floor was open for discussion.

To maintain a balance between the dentists' perspective and policymakers', a total of eight external participants were invited to take part, in addition to five representatives from Derasat and one representative from UNDP Bahrain, bringing a total of fourteen participants.

## 3. PARTICIPANTS



**Figure 1- Derasat team, UNDP representative and the selected group of dentists and orthodontists interviewed.**

### **MS. AIKAN MUKANBETOVA**

Ms. Aikan Mukanbetova is an Acting Head of the UNDP Office in Bahrain. She has previously worked on the EU-UNDP project portfolio in the Arab States region at UNDP Brussels Representation Office. She also served as Country Desk, overseeing and supporting the portfolio of countries in various settings, including crisis settings, at the Regional Bureau for the Arab States at United Nations Development Programme HQ in New York. Ms. Aikan also worked as a UNDP project coordinator in Afghanistan and held program/project management positions at UNDP in Kyrgyzstan.



### **DR. MAYSOON ALALAWI**

Dr. Maysoon Al Alawi is a reputed prosthodontic professional. She runs her personal -"Mays Aesthetic" Dental Center offering specialized treatments in cosmetic dentistry. Dr. Maysoon holds a Master of Science (MSc) in Dentistry Prosthodontics and Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (CAGS) in Prosthodontics, both from The Boston University Institute for Dental Research & Education. Dr. Maysoon has extensive experience in tutoring spanning over 20 years specializing in Prosthodontics. She has a Membership in the American Academy of Fixed Prosthodontics. She has degrees from the Royal College of Surgeons Edinburgh (MGDS). On the strength of over two decades of experience in tutoring and clinical practice, Dr. Maysoon has participated in many industry-related multinational events and has been an invited speaker at many seminars and forums not just in her home country, but also in the region of the larger Middle East.



### **DR. AMEERA ALMOSALI**

Dr. Ameera Almosali is a distinguished consultant, orthodontist, and Founder of the Dental Club. Ameera is also a senior orthodontist with 23 years of experience in dentistry and holds membership of orthodontics from the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, membership of general dental surgery MGDS from Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, and membership of Faculty of dentistry MFDS from Royal College of Surgeons Ireland. Additionally, Dr. Ameera was previously employed at the Ministry of Health. (1997-2015). She has also embarked on her career as an entrepreneur in the year 2015 and decided to expand her center to





provide all dental services in 2021. Furthermore, she has contributed to many kinds of research and conferences in Bahrain and all over the GCC. Moreover, Dr.Ameera is visiting Consultant in Abudhabi at the specialized Dental Center since 2017 and is a proud member of the Entrepreneur Organization.

### **DR. AZHAR NASEEB**

Dr. Azhar Naseeb is a Sr. Dental Consultant Professional with clinical, supervisory, and management experience. Currently, Dr. Naseeb is a Chief, Clinical Trials & Continuing Medical & Professional Development at National Health Regulatory Authority (NHRA) and she is a University of Bahrain faculty member. She has been awarded a



Golden Medal for Competency by His Majesty the King Sheikh Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2017 and also the Golden Medal for Scientific Achievement on the Scientific Day by His Majesty the King Sheikh Isa Bin Salman Al Khalifa on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1995. Dr. Naseeb holds a Fellowship in Healthcare Quality from International Society of Quality ISQua, a Master Degree in Dental Public Health (MDPH) from University College London (UCL), and a Master's Degree in Healthcare Management from Royal College Surgeon Ireland (RCSI), an Advanced Certificate in Comprehensive Implant Dentistry, Bern University-Switzerland, Diploma in Health Care Management from Royal College Surgeon Ireland (RCSI), and a Bachelor's Degree in Dentistry and Oral Surgery from the Faculty of Dentistry, Cairo University. Dr. Naseeb is an NHRA Certified Surveyor in The National Healthcare Facilities Accreditation Program.

### **DR. LAMYA MAHMOOD**

Dr. Lamya Mahmood is a Bahraini entrepreneur, investor, and businesswoman. She is a pioneer in the field of laser dentistry in the GCC, CEO and owner of 3 dental centers, Founder and Managing Director of Medline Medical Equipments and Medline Dental Laboratories in Bahrain. Dr. Lamya's investments expand globally, as she is also the



Founder and Owner of Dr. Lamya's LLC; a properties management and investments company in The United States of America. As well as being the main investor in startups in The United States to companies such as Nasseo LLC., a medical supply company approved by the FDA, along with PaletteApp, the world's largest digital database of architectural products and materials company. Dr. Lamya is an Executive Member in Bin Mahmood Group, Vice President of the Health Committee in Chamber of Commerce Bahrain, Board

Member of S11 Investments Company, Member of The Development and Training Committee at Bahrain Supreme Council of Health, and a Founding member of The Bahrain Dental Society. Her work has not gone unnoticed, as Dr. Lamya has won outstanding awards to honor her entrepreneurial side, some of which include SME of the Year in The Kingdom of Bahrain 2016, IWEC Award 2019, BEO Award 2020, and The Women's Supreme Council Young Female Entrepreneur Business Award.

### **PROFESSOR EBRAHIM AL-AWADHI**

Professor Ebrahim Al-Awadhi qualified with honors from the Dublin Dental School and Hospital in July 1998. He completed his MFD examination in Dublin in 2000. Later that year, he attended the Eastman Dental Institute in London where he completed his Master's degree in orthodontics in 2002 and a Membership of Orthodontics (MOrth) from the Royal College of Surgeons of England in 2003 followed. He obtained his Ph.D. from Trinity College Dublin and FFD from the RCSI in 2012. He was a consultant and the director of teaching and learning (postgraduate) in Dublin Dental University Hospital, Trinity College, and taught undergraduates and postgraduate students. He is an examiner for the MFD Royal College of Surgeons in Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, and Ireland in addition to coordinator and examiner of FFD exams. He is the chairperson of the orthodontic advisory committee of the Irish committee of specialist training and a board member of the faculty of dentistry in the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland. He has multiple publications and lectured internationally.



### **DR. LEENA AL-SHEERAWI**

Dr. Leena Al-Sheerawi is an experienced Consultant Orthodontist and Specialist in Dental Lasers with a demonstrated history of working in the hospital & health care industry. She is skilled in dentofacial aesthetics, Orthodontics, Dental Education, Laser Dentistry, and Dental surgery. Dr. Leena is a strong professional with a Masters of Science in Orthodontics and Lasers focused in Dentistry from King's College London and RWTH Aachen University respectively. Holding the certificate of Membership In Orthodontics of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. Lately, she acts as a Regional Dental Advisor for the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.



### **DR. NAWAF AL HAMAR**

Dr. Nawaf Al Hamar has a Bachelor of Dental Surgery Ireland and a Masters in Orthodontics, London. As well as a Diploma of Membership in Orthodontics Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh, and a Fellowship in Dental Surgery of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, Edinburgh. In addition, Dr. Nawaf also has a Masters



in Healthcare Management Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland. He was the head of the dental department in the Bahrain Defense Force Hospital for 10 years until his retirement. Now, Dr. Nawaf owns his specialist dental center – Ibtisama – which provides a wide range of oral health care services to patients, from routine checkups and teeth/ gum cleaning to fixing braces and treating oral diseases.

### **MR. KHULDOON AL QEDOUMI**

Mr. Khuldoon Al Qedoumi is a board-certified pediatric dentist practicing in Dr.Dhia Medical center. Additionally, he is a holder of a Master's degree in pediatric dentistry



from the University of Jordan and has been practicing dentistry since 2016. Since the beginning of Mr. Khuldoon's dental career, he focused on dealing with children in a comprehensive, patient-centered approach with a high degree of professionalism. His career goal is to change the children's perception of dentistry and provide preventive dental guidance to parents and children caregivers. Among Mr. Khuldoon's interests is the field of special needs dentistry which is dealing with patients with special health care needs and how they perceive oral health. His thesis was related to the attitudes of dental providers regarding the provision of Oral health care for this group of patients.

### **DR. MOHAMAD DARWISH**

Dr. Mohamed Darwish is a renowned dentist in the Kingdom of Bahrain and has received his D.D.S and MFD from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. Moreover, Dr. Darwish is currently the Managing Director at the BDA center and he is also the Conference President at DLS Bahrain, International Dental Conference & Exhibition.



## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. THE ROLE OF TELEMEDICINE AND DENTISTRY DURING COVID-19

#### 4.1.1. WHAT CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT TELEDENTISTRY AND HOW DID YOU/YOUR CLINIC BENEFIT FROM IT?

There was an overall debate on the efficacy of Teledentistry and the extent to which it works. Experts suggested Dentistry is a hands-on field, where most often than not the patients need physical intervention. They suggested that there are alternative ways to use telemedicine more effectively in certain fields such as Dermatology and Psychiatry, but there are only a few cases that might be feasible for Dentistry. For example, for things such as check-ups of an Invisalign procedure or treatment planning. The Doctors believed that teledentistry needs some more research and development, as prescribing antibiotics might be feasible to do so virtually but not fit for invasive procedures.

There was a collective understanding and gratitude towards the government for its support to the sector, they emphasized the fact that they never implemented a complete shutdown of the Oral Health Care sector, as some of the neighboring countries have done. Even at the peak of the outbreak, Bahrain had managed to keep the Oral Health Industry open with most emergency procedures available.

#### 4.1.2. WHAT WERE SOME OF THE ALTERNATIVE WAYS YOU USED TO ENGAGE WITH PATIENTS? (PHONE OR ZOOM CONSULTATIONS IF ANY)

The doctors agreed that one of the most effective ways to reach and engage with patients was through social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Snapchat. Some of the participants shared that the videos and reels they posted on their Instagram pages would depict the sterilization process of the clinic, and as a result, this increased confidence and trust levels in the patients. Additionally, the participants attributed Zoom to assisting dentists and orthodontists in meeting with patients and understanding their ailments or requests. Moreover, Zoom and Whatsapp helped the dentists in communicating preventative measures to be taken at home to the patients and following up with them online. Particularly with pediatric

dentistry, the participants expressed Whatsapp and Zoom aided in educating parents on oral hygiene for their children.

That being said, the participants acknowledged that Whatsapp may not always be the most efficient way in communicating with the patients and that dentists would have to be careful in the medical advice they share. Any incorrect medical advice would be regarded as criminal law, rather than under the civil law mandates. Therefore, some of the participants expressed interest in the application "Doctori" where the patient can enter his complaint through the app portal and there would be multiple doctors and dentists to answer them. However, this app is not popular enough in the Kingdom of Bahrain, and therefore not accessible to most patients and doctors in the kingdom. In the future, perhaps, the participants said that there might be a chance in which Doctori can be used more frequently in Bahrain. Moreover, intervention treatment and early detection would still require a face-to-face appointment with the dentist and the patient, since it would be nearly impossible to detect the dental issue through virtual platforms.

4.1.3. IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, HOW HAS LIMITING THE NUMBER OF COMPANIONS ENTERING THE ROOM AFFECTED THE PATIENT-DOCTOR DYNAMIC - PARTICULARLY WITH CHILDREN? HOW DID THIS IMPACT THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECT?

There was an exchange of views regarding the reality of limiting the number of companions/guardians from entering the room. On one hand, the dentists stated that it was not practical for them to practice this rule in their clinic as they believed that children in particular had a psychological right for their parents to be there with them. However, the dentists stressed that more adults were asking for someone to be in the room with them than kids were. On the other hand, some believed that this was a good experience for the kids to be in the room alone and provided them a chance to be more outspoken and make their own decisions. And if the parents were to come in later and ask any questions, they would be more than welcome to do so.

## 4.2. FINANCIAL OBSTACLES FOR DENTISTS DURING COVID-19 AND OVERCOMING THEM

4.2.1. HAS THE NUMBER OF PATIENTS THAT YOU REGULARLY RECEIVE PRE-COVID-19 INCREASED, DECREASED, OR RETURNED TO WHAT THEY WERE BEFORE?

The dentists noted that during the early stages of the pandemic, the number of patients had decreased - and that was a challenging time to navigate through all aspects of life in general. Additionally, the dentists remarked that patients were afraid to go to hospitals and clinics in general, particularly dental clinics because close interaction is required. Some dentists remarked that patients canceled their sessions whenever Bahrain was in the Orange or Red Levels of Covid-19 restrictions.

However, the experts discussed that as cases reduced in the Kingdom of Bahrain, people developed more confidence to go into clinics. The significance of oral health may have been overlooked, as the dentists mentioned, however, the rise of confidence levels had motivated people to go back to clinics for regular cleanings and checkups. The dentists also discussed the important role of marketing tools such as social media; many clinics offered discounts on their Instagram pages, which attracted patients. According to the dentists present at the roundtable, the number of patients returned to around 80-90% of the number they received pre-Covid-19. Moreover, the dentists agreed that the return of patients was aided by the efforts of the Government of Bahrain to ensure the safety and prosperity of all.

4.2.2 HOW HAS COVID-19 AFFECTED YOU FINANCIALLY? (MAINTENANCE FOR EQUIPMENT, SANITIZATION PROCEDURE FOR EQUIPMENT, GENERAL UPKEEP) WERE THE PRICES FOR THE DENTAL WORK IN YOUR CLINIC THE SAME AS PRE-COVID, OR DID THEY HAVE TO CHANGE?

Covid affected clinics in many ways. Experts stated that they did not have to change their prices during the pandemic. Initially, in the first couple of months, the number of clients in the clinics had decreased drastically, as people were scared due to the risk of contracting the virus. Over time clinics began buying sanitation devices, and some went to the extent of buying aerosol filters to assure the patients' foremost safety and sanitation standards. Some had created new rules of canceling the waiting area altogether and making patients wait in their car when they arrived at the clinic. In addition to having no more than one client inside the check-in area, and creating a mandatory plastic shoe cover. During the first year of the

pandemic, some had to decrease all staff working hours by twenty-five percent to keep afloat. They also started to push their presence on social media platforms to try to get their message out there.

During the peak of the pandemic, they received support from Tamkeen and the government, with some being fortunate enough to have their rent postponed. An expert said that this experience has stressed the importance of looking at expenses and costs and always having a contingency plan and an emergency budget. In addition to being more prudent when thinking of expenditures or in terms of overstaffing.

### **4.3. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ORAL HEALTH AND DENTISTRY**

#### **4.3.1. WERE COSMETIC DENTAL PROCEDURES IN HIGH DEMAND DURING COVID-19?**

The dentists pointed out that cosmetic dental procedures were particularly popular amongst the people of Bahrain during Covid-19. As people began saving money due to entertainment venues, restaurants, and shopping malls being closed during the early stages of the pandemic, they soon saved more money than usual for self-care treatments. Moreover, the question of masks covering people's faces came up, and how that paralleled an interest in cosmetic dental procedures. The dentists discussed that despite masks covering people's mouths, it was still important for people to take care of their beauty and wellness during Covid-19 - as mental health was severely affected, people wanted to look and feel good again. According to a study done by the Ontario Academy for General Dentistry, people have taken more interest in their smiles due to Zoom meetings and virtual calls that require the face to show more prominently.

Therefore, the dentists concluded, a combination of an increase in savings, low self-esteem, and an increase in virtual interactions.

#### **4.3.2. IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, HOW HAS LIMITING THE NUMBER OF COMPANIONS ENTERING THE ROOM AFFECTED THE PATIENT-DOCTOR DYNAMIC - PARTICULARLY WITH CHILDREN? HOW DID THIS IMPACT THE PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECT?**

There was an exchange of views regarding the feasibility of limiting the number of companions/guardians from entering the room. On one hand, the dentists stated that it was not practical for them to practice this rule in their clinic as they believed that children in particular had a psychological right for their parents to

be there with them. However, the dentists stressed that more adults were asking for someone to be in the room with them than kids were. On the other hand, some believed that this was a good experience for the kids to be in the room alone and provided them a chance to be more outspoken and make their own decisions. And if the parents were to come in later and ask any questions, they would be more than welcome to do so.

#### 4.3.3. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT COVID-19 PROMOTED OR RESULTED IN NEGLECT OF ORAL HYGIENE IN BAHRAIN?

The dentists reached a consensus that oral hygiene was neglected for a short while during the early stages of the pandemic because people prioritized other branches of medical health. However, the dentists agreed that Covid-19 has also given dentists the platform to emphasize the importance of oral hygiene and the significance it has on our overall well-being. Patient education became more accessible due to Social Media, and people were more inclined to inquire about the ways they can maintain oral hygiene from home. Furthermore, the dentists also commented on how collaboration and cooperation between them as colleagues increased through Zoom meetings and conferences. In their personal experiences, the dentists collectively agreed that the camaraderie and collaborative efforts between them made it easier to spread education to patients on oral hygiene.

#### 4.3.4. HAS THE SUCCESS STORY OF THE GOVERNMENT WITH HANDLING THE CORONAVIRUS IN BAHRAIN ASSISTED DENTISTS IN NAVIGATING THE NEW PROCEDURES OF THE WORKPLACE?

The group of experts was thankful for the Government of Bahrain in its efforts to keep the clinics open and steer clear of implementing a full lockdown. They state that this played a key role in keeping the clinics day to day operations running smoothly and their businesses staying alive. They declare that if it was not for the government's assistance in educating the public of the virus and their financial aid, things would have not been the way they operate today. Additionally, the group stated that doctors from neighboring countries were thinking of moving and had moved to Bahrain as they had to see the successful management of the pandemic.

Furthermore, there was additional assistance from the NHRA to ease the burden on clinics and doctors. Additionally, the NHRA helped in the renewal of the doctors' licenses and waived the number of renewals



for the licensing. Moreover, the NHRA halved the number of hours needed to pass the license exam which is done annually. The government aided in restructuring their business in terms of accounts and administration.

## 5. FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

**Recommendation 1:** Being proactive with health regulations such as masks, shoe covers, gloves, and face shields need to be implemented consistently.

**Recommendation 2:** Promote more research and development for Teledentistry to be a more feasible method of practice.

**Recommendation 3:** Apply changes for the waiting area in clinics where patients and guardians can wait in the car, rather than in one room.

**Recommendation 4:** Policymakers should strategize a way to protect doctors legally from giving their advice online or via social media platforms, as wrong advice is treated as a criminal offense rather than a civil offense.

**Recommendation 5:** The dentist community must create an emergency plan for future pandemics including a consistent stock of PPE's (personal protective equipment).

**Recommendation 6:** Putting more emphasis on businesses saving money for crisis management and emergencies.