



# The First Dentist in Ontario to Receive the COVID-19 Vaccine?

**O**n December 28, 2020, I received a text from Dr. Gurbaz Sandhu's (GP, London and Port Elgin). Ontario had just entered into a strict lockdown. The media had been focusing on the bungled COVID-19 vaccine rollout, while infections and deaths continued to rise.

"Could this be real?" I thought. "Perhaps a joke?" The photo was Dr. Sandhu's vaccination record, showing he had received the COVID vaccine. Then he wrote, "Time to get back to work!" and I knew it was for real.

I took it all in. Deep breath and exhale. And a chill shot down my spine. A sense of hope and happiness came over me. "It's finally happening!" I said aloud to exactly no one. I actually knew someone who had been vaccinated. I was beside myself.

"I think I'm the first dentist in Ontario to get it," he typed. "I'm in Dallas."

Then it made sense to me: Dr. Sandhu has dual Canadian-US citizenship and is licensed to practice dentistry in Ontario and Texas. He received the shot in the USA. So how did it all come to pass?

## mRNA Technology

On March 15, 2020, the RCDSO sent out an Ontario-wide e-mail, recommending that dentists only provide emergency treatments at their offices in light of COVID-19. Schools closed and people were panic-buying groceries, hand sanitizer and (for some reason) toilet paper.

But, per Dr. Sandhu, all the hand washing, social distancing, travel restrictions and lockdowns were only meant to buy us time so that pharmaceutical companies could develop and the government could get and distribute a vaccine. He immediately started researching COVID-19 vaccine development by pharmaceutical giants, Moderna and Pfizer. He was impressed with the new messenger RNA (mRNA) technology.

mRNA technology is revolutionary. It's based on the idea that the vaccine can deliver instructions directly into cells, telling them to create a small spike protein so that the body can produce antibodies and activate T-cells to attack and destroy it. It's this same spike protein that's unique to the COVID-19 virus that allows it to spread. No part of the actual virus is in the vaccine; just instructions on how to create the protein spike so that the body can destroy it once the actual COVID-19 virus enters the body. There's also belief it can protect against COVID-19 mutations, so long as booster shots are taken from time to time.

Despite it typically taking years to develop an approved vaccine, it only took months for Pfizer and Moderna to do it using this new technology. Did they rush it? Was it safe? The world waited anxiously for the results of mass clinical trials. The results: well over 90% effective when booster shots were taken weeks apart – much higher than the typical 40–60% effectiveness for annual flu vaccines. But would the general public accept it enough to roll up their sleeves?

For Dr. Sandhu, it was a no-brainer: "I trusted the science and scientists to keep us safe. So when I saw the 80-year old head of the U.S. Coronavirus task force, Dr. Anthony Fauci, get the Moderna vaccine, I knew it was safe. I had no doubts after that."

## When Opportunity Knocks

Like most dentists, Dr. Sandhu's practices were closed for the end-of-year holidays. He was in London, Ont. on Christmas Eve with his family before the lockdown. His sister – a dentist in Texas – called and mentioned that she was going to get the vaccine on Monday, December 28 (the Texas State board had sent an e-mail to all their dentists, advising that they could get the vaccine that day).

Seeing a small widow, Dr. Sandhu proclaimed:



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“That’s it. I’m doing this”. He put pressure on himself to do it. Partly because he lived in a multi-generational household; partly because he wanted to take a lead role and set an example for his patients and his teams.

He drove down to Michigan, unsure of how it would all play out. But he was hopeful. He had no issues crossing the border as he is a U.S. citizen and holds a U.S. passport. No requirement to quarantine in Michigan.

Then on December 27, Dr. Sandhu hopped on a plane to Dallas, Texas.

“I was a little worried about catching COVID-19 in the U.S., but I went prepared and was pleasantly surprised by what I saw at the airport: except for the heavy traffic the airport, people were wearing masks and socially distancing.”

When he landed in Dallas (where he has a dental practice), Dr. Sandhu noticed that the usual energy there was missing. “It’s usually a beautiful place”, he said, “but it didn’t feel the same this time.”

### Reluctance to get the Vaccine

Another shock to Dr. Sandhu: the general reluctance of people in Texas to get vaccinated. “They were so privileged to have the vaccine – and lots of it. But my sister and I knew actual Texan health care professionals who said they wouldn’t get it at all, or at least immediately. Despite the science and efficacy and all they had been through, they were still deeply skeptical!” A troubling New York Post article also found a reluctance among health care workers throughout the U.S. to get the vaccine. And it made no sense to Dr. Sandhu: “It’s not like getting a new iPhone, when you wait a year or two for them to work out the kinks through upgrades, right?”

### Driving Around

On December 28, Dr. Sandhu met up with his sister 8:00 am at the Methodist McKinney Hospital. That was one of the many sites that had the vaccine available for health care workers and the elderly. But when they showed up, they were told that they had no more vaccines and to come back the next day.

Dr. Sandhu was initially upset. “What if I kept coming back and they kept running out? I came all this way and was starting to doubt whether I could even get it.”

But then his sister obtained a list of other vaccination sites. Over 1,000 sites were identified, as well as the number (and we’re talking tens of thousands) of Modern vs. Pfizer vaccine available that very week! Now it was up to Dr. Sandhu to find the right site.

He noticed that Purple Hearts Primary Care Services in Grand Prairie had 1,800 Modern vaccine shots available. It was only a 45-minute drive. He

knew the area and felt it wouldn’t be busy. So he hopped in his Dodge Challenger rental and hurried over to Grand Prairie.

“There was no calling up these vaccination sites; it’s first come, first served,” he says. “I just had to go and try.” When he finally showed up that day, it was around 3:00 p.m. “Thankfully, there wasn’t a big lineup of cars. Just a large medical RV with about five nurses walking around the parked cars, administering the vaccine and also doing COVID-19 tests. They were very organized.”

He lowered his car’s window and asked an older man wearing a mask how long he had been waiting in his car. “About three hours”, the man replied, somewhat frustrated. The was troublesome, as Dr. Sandhu was due back in Canada.

That’s when a nurse came over to Dr. Sandhu’s car and asked what he does. “I’m a dentist,” he replied showing his U.S. passport. That was enough to put him at the head of the line. She handed him some paperwork, told him to download the CDC’s V-Safe After Vaccination Health Checker App on his phone, and 15 minutes later she injected the vaccine into his arm.

He couldn’t believe it. He got the Moderna vaccine! Just like that. “See you in a few weeks!” the nurse told him and then she left. Totally free for all U.S. citizens.

A sense of pure bliss came over him. He felt privileged to get it. And proud enough to tell his family, friends, and the author of this article!

“I set out to get it. And one way or another I was going to get it. I wanted to start the trend of returning to normality after almost a year of suffering. So eventually my kids could see my in-laws again. So I could tell my team and patients so they wouldn’t have reservations. I made it happen.”

### Side Effects

The next day, Dr. Sandhu was home back in Canada. His left arm was slightly sore at the injection site. But that was it. No other side effects. The soreness went away after a day. He was sure to be tested for COVID when he was home (and tested negative).

For the next two weeks, the V-Safe App asked him how he was feeling and he entered in his responses. The information gets collected by the CDC.

Was Dr. Sandhu the first Ontario dentist to get the vaccine? “Yeah, maybe even in Canada.,” he says. “Hopefully, I’ll get my second shot in Canada.”

If not, time for another road trip. ✨

*Visit [oralhealthgroup.com](https://www.oralhealthgroup.com) for a full list of references.*