

Trends in Rheumatology Patient Care and Practice Operations Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

Kristin M. Zimmerman Savill*, Andrew J. Klink, Cherrishe Brown-Bickerstaff, Yolaine Jeune-Smith, Bruce Feinberg

Cardinal Health™ Specialty Solutions, Dublin, Ohio, USA

*Presenting author

Introduction

- Advances in the field of rheumatology and increasing demands from the aging population have notably impacted trends in rheumatology practice over the past decade.
- Arguably one of the most impactful factors on medical practice in the past couple of years has been the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which has affected medical care across specialties and settings.
- As the COVID-19 pandemic transitions to an endemic in the United States (U.S.), the long-term impact of the past two years on healthcare is of great interest.

Objective

- This research aims to gain insights into trends in rheumatology patient care and the financial health and operations of community rheumatology practices in the U.S. from pre- versus post-pandemic years.

Methods

- Web-based surveys regarding rheumatology clinic operations and patient care pre- and post-COVID-19 pandemic were fielded between July and September 2021 to rheumatologists from community- and hospital-based practices throughout the U.S.
- Data were described using descriptive statistics.

Results

- 87 rheumatologists participated in this study, approximately half (51.7%) of whom practice in privately-owned community settings, and the majority (73.6%) of whom have been in practice for over 10 years (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of participating rheumatologists

	Participating rheumatologists (N=87)
Size/type of practice, n (%)	
Privately owned community practice	45 (51.7)
Solo, community	17 (19.5)
Small, community (2-5 physicians)	9 (10.3)
Medium, community (6-10 physicians)	7 (8.0)
Large, community (>10 physicians)	12 (13.8)
Community practice, owned by a larger entity	22 (25.3)
Medical center or academic institution	14 (16.1)
Community site for an academic center	4 (4.6)
Community-based hospital	2 (2.3)
Years in practice, n (%)	
5-10	23 (26.4)
11-15	18 (20.7)
16-20	21 (24.1)
21-25	10 (11.5)
≥26	15 (17.2)
Percentage of working time spent in direct patient care	
Mean (standard deviation)	94.3 (8.2)
Median	98.0
Number of patients seen on average day, n (%)	
1-10	9 (10.3)
11-15	24 (27.6)
16-20	29 (33.3)
21-25	17 (19.5)
≥26	8 (9.2)

- While the majority (83.9%) of responding rheumatologists reported conducting no patient visits via telemedicine before the pandemic, 93.1% anticipate conducting some patient visits via telemedicine since the pandemic (Figure 1).
- Among 81 rheumatologists who anticipate conducting visits via telemedicine in the future, most (90.1%) indicated that, they will utilize telemedicine to see patients who lack transportation to appointments, 45.7% reported they will use it to see patients who are immunocompromised, and 40.7% stated that they will use it to triage patients who may need emergency care (Table 2).

Figure 1. Percentage of rheumatology patient visits estimated to be conducted via telemedicine before and since the COVID-19 pandemic

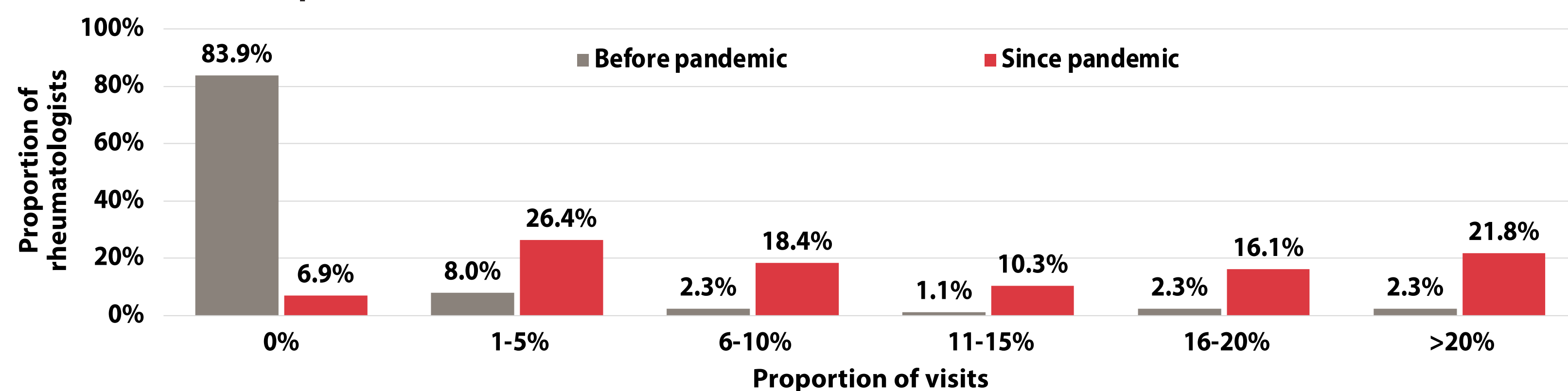


Table 2. Purposes for which telemedicine will be used by participating rheumatologists in the future

	Rheumatologists who anticipate conducting telemedicine in the future (n=81)
To see patients who lack transportation to appointments	73 (90.1)
To see patients who are immunocompromised	37 (45.7)
To triage patients who may need emergency care	33 (40.7)
Other	10 (12.3)

- The majority of participating physicians (57.5%) reported that the financial health of their practice was about the same or better at the time of survey in comparison to before the pandemic (Figure 2).
- Approximately 79.3% of rheumatologists reported seeing similar levels of or more new patient referrals in comparison to before the pandemic (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Financial health of rheumatologists' practices at the time of the survey versus before the COVID-19 pandemic

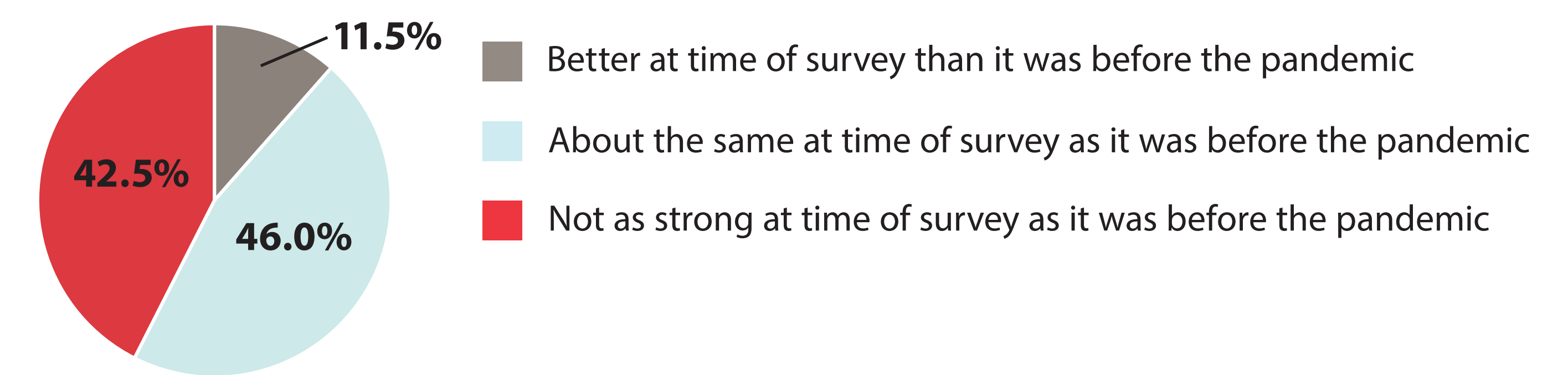
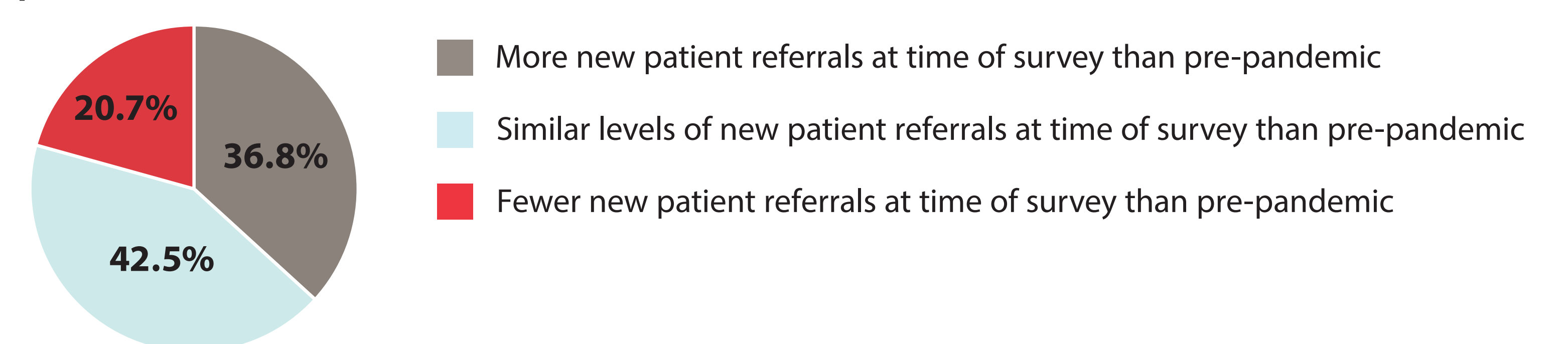


Figure 3. New rheumatology patient referrals at the time of the survey versus before the COVID-19 pandemic



- The majority of respondents (57.5%) indicated that the pandemic has led to the adoption of new approaches to patient care, some of which will be maintained over the long term. Less than half of rheumatologists (42.5%) indicated that the pandemic had only a temporary impact or had very little impact on patient care (Figure 4).
- Most of the participating rheumatologists (89.7%) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement "Social and economic challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic have had a negative impact on the health of my patients" (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Reported impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rheumatology patient care

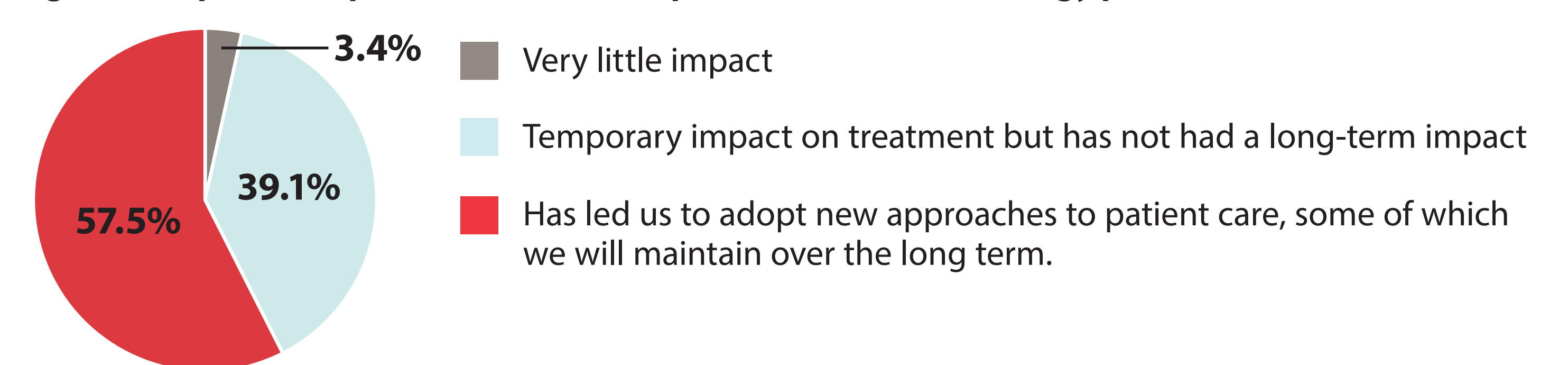
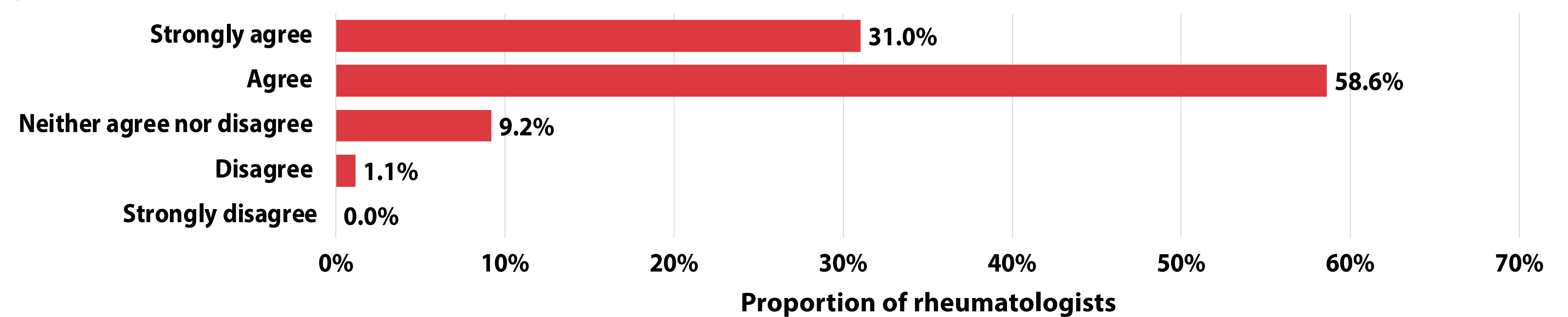


Figure 5. Rheumatologists' degree of agreement with the statement:

"Social and economic challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic have had a negative impact on the health of my patients."



- Mental health support (82.8%), medication adherence support (60.9%), and support navigating insurance coverage/managed care (55.2%) were the top three cited gaps or unmet needs in patient care exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 3).

Table 3. Gaps and unmet needs in patient care revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic

	Participating rheumatologists (N=87)
Mental health support	72 (82.8)
Medication adherence support	53 (60.9)
Support navigating insurance coverage/managed care	48 (55.2)
Support with managing the cost of therapy	45 (51.7)
Caregiver support	37 (42.5)
Other	4 (4.6)
None	1 (1.1)

Conclusions

- Findings from this survey-based study among 87 rheumatologists from community- and hospital-based practices throughout the U.S. indicate that the pandemic has impacted rheumatology patient care, including, notably, a shift towards conducting more visits in telemedicine settings.
- Despite this shift in patient care, the majority of participating rheumatologists indicated that the financial standing of their practice and patient referrals were similar to or better than pre-pandemic years.
- This study included a limited number of rheumatologists and findings may not be representative of all rheumatologists or community- and hospital-based practices that manage patients with rheumatic disorders throughout the U.S.

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