

OPINION

Rep. Joaquin Castro diagnosed with cancer, undergoes surgery at MD Anderson Cancer Center

Cary Clack, San Antonio Express-News

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U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro underwent surgery in Houston Monday morning for cancer found in his small intestine.

The type of cancer he has is serious but treatable, his staff said.

Castro is part of one of San Antonio's most prominent and significant political families. He is the identical twin brother of former San Antonio Mayor and Housing Urban and Development Secretary Julián Castro. They are the sons of activists Rosie Castro and Jesse Guzman.

Castro, 48, is a six-term Democratic lawmaker, who represents San Antonio's 20th Congressional District on the West Side. He has had a national profile since his election to Congress in 2012.

In a statement his office released Monday, Castro expressed optimism: "Today, I successfully underwent surgery to remove gastrointestinal neuroendocrine tumors. Last summer, doctors discovered these small, slow-growing, and mostly asymptomatic tumors following a series of tests.

"My prognosis is good. I expect to be home recovering in Texas for several weeks before returning to Washington to continue my work on behalf of the people of my hometown, San Antonio.

"Thank you to the doctors, nurses, and medical staff at MD Anderson Cancer Center and the University of Texas Health Science Center San Antonio for their care and treatment and thank you to my family for their love and support."

Neuroendocrine tumors, or NETs, are malignant cancers that can develop anywhere endocrine cells are present. These cells are essential to regulating body functions such

as growth, reproduction, and metabolism; and while they're distributed throughout the body, these types of tumors are usually found in the lungs, small intestine and pancreas.

About 12,000 people are diagnosed with it each year.

Because they're often asymptomatic, the tumors can be present for years before discovery.

If not for an accident on a dark road in Spain last summer, the tumors would have gone undetected.

Last July, Castro was in Bilbao, Spain for a meeting of the United States-Spain Council, which promotes a stronger relationship between the two countries. Castro was the outgoing honorary chair.

One night, the car taking Castro and three other passengers back to their hotel outside of Bilbao hit a wild boar. No one was seriously injured, but Castro was taken to the hospital as a precaution. A doctor noticed something disconcerting on Castro's MRI and suggested he get it checked out when he returned home.

The tumor spread from the small intestine to the liver. The primary tumor in the small intestine was removed in Monday's operation. Since September, Castro has been receiving a monthly injection of Lanreotide, which slows the growth of tumors.

His post-surgery treatment won't include chemotherapy or radiation. Instead, he will continue to receive the monthly Lanreotide shots, Castro said. Only if the tumors continue to grow would he receive other medical treatment such as radiation.

Castro sits on the House Intelligence Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee and is the ranking member of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere.

Full disclosure: In 2011, I left my first stint with the Express-News to become communications director for Castro's first congressional campaign. When he was elected in 2012, I became his district director through August of 2014.

Going public with something so private as one's health is a dilemma most people don't face. It's different with an elected public official. Castro's natural disposition to keep the cancer diagnosis and treatment private conflicted with his responsibility to his constituents to be transparent.

“Because of this surgery,” Castro told me ahead of the operation at MD Anderson Cancer Center. “I’m going to have to take some time off from work, and I wanted to be honest with the people who sent me to Washington about why.”

Castro hasn’t missed any work because of his illness and was hoping to have the surgery done during the two-week congressional recess, which just concluded, but his surgeon’s schedule didn’t permit it.

Until this announcement, Castro had told only a small circle of family and friends about the diagnosis and surgery.

As it does with everyone, being diagnosed with cancer caught Castro by surprise.

“I had spent the first half of 2022 getting into shape and was feeling good,” he told me. “I’ve always been in pretty good health, never been hospitalized and or had any chronic illness. But being Hispanic from South Texas, diabetes is the boogeyman you’re always watching out for. So, cancer was not what I expected.”

After some time in Houston, Castro will return to San Antonio to recuperate at home with his wife, Anna, and their three children, the youngest less than 1 year old.

As he recovers, there’s another issue Castro has been thinking more about: As a member of Congress, he has excellent health insurance that isn’t available to most Americans.

“We need universal health care coverage in this country,” Castro said. “Because no one should have to face an illness like cancer without the means to get the full treatment they need.”

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