

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4320

Colonel Mark Stackle
Brooke Army Medical Center
Fort Sam Houston, Joint Base San Antonio
3441 Roger Brooke Dr,
San Antonio, Texas 78234

October 26, 2023

Dear Col. Stackle,

I am deeply concerned about Brooke Army Medical Center's (BAMC) ability to treat patients safely and retain its Level I Trauma designation because of allegations the *San Antonio Express-News* published yesterday regarding BAMC's widespread failures to appropriately clean and sterilize surgical equipment.

The *Express News* report details 24 cancelled surgeries and four delayed procedures over this past summer because of issues related to contaminated surgical equipment. Egregiously, the report describes an incident where an elderly trauma patient was kept under general anesthesia for three additional hours while surgeons scrambled to find clean surgical tools.

In response to these incidents, nine orthopedic surgeons — the entire orthopedic department at BAMC — recommended that BAMC reduce surgeries until the Sterile Processing Department (SPD) resolves the issue, which would severely impact the availability of trauma care in San Antonio. Hospital leadership must immediately address and remediate these issues before a patient is severely injured — or worse.

As the military's flagship medical institution and its only Level I Trauma Center, BAMC provides important care to military families, veterans, and civilians from San Antonio and South Texas who require emergency trauma care. BAMC must meet high standards to retain its Level I designation. These standards include ensuring doctors and medical staff are continuously trained in new trauma care techniques and maintaining its ability to provide on demand medical care.¹

The current state of BAMC's sterilization practices is dangerous for patients, delays necessary surgical treatment, and distracts doctors from their ability to do life-saving work. Without a proper sterilization system, I am worried BAMC is in danger of losing its designation and its ability to provide outstanding medical care to my constituents.

Six years ago, the *Express-News* reported that BAMC was forced to temporarily close more than half of its operating rooms and reduce elective surgeries after it found more than 70 instances of

¹ [Texas Administrative Code \(state.tx.us\)](https://www.state.tx.us)

improper sterilization, including 16 incidents in which “fragments of organic material such as bone, skin or blood were left on surgical tools.”² In response, BAMC administrators increased staffing and quality checks in the SPD to improve the quality and consistency of the sterilization process. At the time, the chief of the SPD, Lt. Col. Trish O’Neal-Mellen, described the changes as “like night and day.”³

If yesterday’s reporting is accurate, BAMC has returned to old habits that put patients at serious risk. The allegations in this reporting must be fully investigated and any systemic issues must be fixed permanently. To that end, I am requesting answers to the following questions by November 17, 2023:

- 1) The *Express-News* quoted Dr. Evan Renz, deputy to the Commander for Quality and Safety at BAMC, as saying “bioburden does not rank very high in the list of things that we have to focus on” and “anything more than zero [reports of bioburden] means that we’re responding to it.”
 - Given the history of contamination issues at BAMC, why is bioburden not a high priority for BAMC leadership?
 - If the allegations in the *Express News* are accurate, what actions are BAMC leadership taking to reduce bioburden incidents?
- 2) What issues does the SPD currently face that may have caused the allegations described in the *Express-News* reporting?
- 3) Please explain how BAMC will continue to provide its trauma center with the necessary amount of sterilized surgical tools to treat emergency trauma patients.
- 4) How many staff currently work at the SPD?
 - If SPD is short staffed, how many staffers does SPD need to fully meet BAMC’s surgical demands?
 - If SPD is short of staff, why?
- 5) Please explain why the remedies BAMC implemented in 2017 were not sufficient to prevent these issues from reoccurring.
- 6) How many Patient Safety Reports were filed between May 1, 2023 and October 25, 2023 due to improperly cleaned and sterilized surgical tools? Please provide these reports.
 - How does this number compare with reports filed in the same period last year?
 - How many surgeries in total have been cancelled because of these issues?

² <https://www.expressnews.com/news/local/article/Discovery-of-unsterile-tools-forces-BAMC-to-close-11109467.php>

³ <https://www.tpr.org/military-veterans-issues/2017-12-13/brooke-army-medical-center-takes-action-to-end-shortage-of-sterile-equipment>

Thousands of my constituents — both civilians and military families — receive care at BAMC every month. The position BAMC finds itself in again is unacceptable and untenable for the people of San Antonio and our nation's military heroes.

I appreciate your dedication to ensuring BAMC remains a world-class medical center. I anticipate you will uphold the high standard my constituents rely on and that you will take the necessary steps to ensure this does not occur in the future. Please keep me informed of your progress on this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JOAQUIN CASTRO". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial 'J'.

Joaquin Castro

Member of Congress