

CLEAN INSTRUMENTS: THEY'RE INSTRUMENTAL!

Sterile Processing Department works behind the scenes
disinfecting nearly 200,000 instruments a year.

JUST HOW BIG OF A JOB IS STERILIZING INSTRUMENTS IN A HOSPITAL?

AN 'ITEM' CAN MEAN A TRAY OF 100
INSTRUMENTS OR JUST ONE SINGLE TOOL.

THE STERILE PROCESSING TEAM
AVERAGES 3,700 ITEMS A WEEK.

THEY AVERAGE 16,000 ITEMS A MONTH.

THAT'S ROUGHLY 192,000 ITEMS CLEANED,
ASSEMBLED, AND STERILIZED PER YEAR!





What's a surgeon without his scalpel? A doctor without her instruments? Thanks to the incredible work put in day in and day out by the Sterile Processing Department at CHI Memorial, those are questions that thankfully never have to be answered.

"It's a big job," says Jennifer McNeely, manager of the Sterile Processing Department. "We clean, assemble, sterilize, and store all the instruments that are used in surgery here."

The 50 people working on the sterile processing team are crucial to hospital operations because if the surgeon and staff working in an operating room don't have sterilized instruments, they cannot perform surgeries.

"Our number one goal is always patient and coworker safety," McNeely says. "And that starts with our hospital staff having the right equipment for surgery. We make sure that everything they need is in working order."

McNeely has worked at CHI Memorial Hospital for 19 years, cleaning thousands of instruments in that time, helping to prevent infections. But like so many other industries, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a whole new set of challenges and expectations.

"We had staffing challenges just like everyone else," McNeely says. "Our own employees got sick, and it was also hard to get masks for quite a while."

"That's why we do what we do, why I do what I do – because we love helping other human beings," McNeely says.

With masks being in such short supply, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) temporarily approved sterilizing the N95 masks that the staff would wear when conducting patient care. Those doctors and nurses could wear the masks up to three times, meaning McNeely and the Sterile Processing Department now had a massive, additional duty using concentrated hydrogen peroxide to reprocess the masks for use.

"That was an added job for us during the pandemic that took a lot of time and care, but we were glad to support our doctors and nurses out on the frontlines with the patients," McNeely says. "With those efforts, we were able to keep people working who otherwise couldn't have."

So — how do they keep an operation this crucial running smoothly? It's all about teamwork and communication.

"The specialty coordinators, surgeons, and staff all work together to do what's best for the patient," McNeely says. "My best employees are the ones who are the most passionate about doing what they can to the best of their ability so we are offering perfectly sterile instruments to help our patients."

And while this team operates behind the scenes, without often ever seeing the patients, they feel connected to them — especially when they hear that a surgery went well.