

Texas heart surgeons accused of double-booking surgeries, delegating dangerous procedures

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Three Houston medical institutions have agreed to pay \$15 million to settle federal allegations that they looked the other way for years as three

surgeons double-booked themselves for complex heart procedures, dipping in and out of concurrent operations and leaving unqualified residents in charge of dangerous procedures.

Three doctors—Joseph Coselli, 71, Joseph Lamelas, 63 and David Ott, 77—routinely "engaged in a regular practice of running two operating rooms at once and delegating key aspects of extremely complicated and risky heart surgeries to unqualified medical residents," the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas said in a statement announcing the settlement.

A 2019 whistleblower complaint sparked the investigation into practices at Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center, Baylor College of Medicine, and the Surgical Associates of Texas. The practice not only violated Medicare regulations but also jeopardized [patient safety](#) during "some of the most complicated operations performed at any hospital," federal officials said.

"Patients entrusted these surgeons with their lives—submitting to operations where one missed cut is the difference between life and death," U.S. Attorney Alamdar Hamdani said in the statement. "Allegedly, the patients were unaware their doctor was leaving for another operating room."

Ott outright denied the allegations.

"We have proven, using hospital records and operating room timelines, that I was in the operating rooms and did the operations that I claimed and, therefore, have done nothing wrong," he told the Houston Chronicle.

At least four patients died during overlapping surgeries under Ott's auspices, according to the whistleblower lawsuit that started it all, which

was unsealed on Monday and obtained by the Chronicle. Patients were anesthetized for longer periods of time and suffered complications.

The surgeons' insistence they had spent the entire time in the [operating room](#) of each [surgery](#) was at odds with their schedules. Coselli, for example, was at one point scheduled to perform 32 hours of surgery in 16 hours, the Chronicle reported.

This meant they were performing two to four times more surgeries than the average number done by cardiac specialists elsewhere in the U.S., a volume reflected in their compensation. They raked in up to four times more than average for their specialty, upwards of \$2 million annually, the lawsuit stated.

The 5,000 overlapping surgeries they performed over seven years brought the health institutions more than \$150 million in revenue, the Chronicle reported, citing the court documents.

The claims are allegations, not an indication of liability, the U.S. Attorneys Office noted. The institutions admitted no wrongdoing and said they had only agreed to the settlement "to resolve documentation and billing matters" related to Medicare and Medicaid compliance and to spare the expense of a trial, reported Houston Public Media.

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