Editorial Essays | TORGJ | Volume 2 Issue 2 | Special Issue | 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64573/torgj2606006

The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ)

https://torgjournal.org/

ISSN: 3105-3262

Advancing Sterile Processing Through Governance Intelligence: The G-SSIF Framework for Improving CSSD Coordination, Productivity, and Patient Safety

(TORG-NZ Global CSSD Best Practice Essay Competition 2026 - First Place Winner)

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Declaration:
Author's Contribution: The author conceived, wrote, reviewed and approved the final manuscript.
Conflict of Interest: No conflict of interest.
Funding: No funding received.

Article History:
Received: 19-04-2026
Accepted: 19-06-2026
Available Online: 21-06-2026

QR access this Article

ABSTRACT

Sterilization of reusable medical devices is essential to prevention and safe surgical care. Despite strong technical standards, variability in sterile processing performance persists across healthcare systems. While core sterilization practices are often consistent, gaps remain in coordination-related areas such as workflow alignment, service delivery, and workforce capability. These gaps lead to delays, instrument unavailability, and increased patient risk. This essay examines sterile processing through a patient safety and system performance lens, arguing that technical compliance alone does not ensure safe outcomes. The Gacias Sterilization Systems Intelligence Framework (G-SSIF) is introduced as a governance model integrating system capability, operational performance, coordination, and AI-enabled intelligence. The conceptual framework supports alignment between CSSD and surgical demand, improving on-time procedure starts, reducing case delays, and strengthening perioperative performance. Strengthening coordination in sterile processing is a practical and scalable pathway to safer surgical care.

Keywords: *Central Sterile Services Department (CSSD); Sterile Processing; Surgical Patient Safety; Healthcare Governance; Perioperative Performance*

Competition Recognition:

This article was selected as the First Place Winner of The Operating Room Global New Zealand (TORG-NZ) CSSD Best Practice Essay Competition 2026 and subsequently underwent editorial review prior to publication in The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ).

MAIN TEXT

Sterile processing plays a direct role in surgical patient safety, yet many failures are not caused by lack of knowledge or equipment. Instead, they occur when systems do not work together. This essay addresses the role of CSSD in surgical patient safety by examining breakdowns in coordination, communication, and workflow alignment. In practice, instruments may meet sterilization standards but still arrive late or incomplete. When this happens, procedures are delayed, teams are disrupted, and patient risk increases. These are system failures, not technical failures.
Sterilization of reusable medical devices remains a cornerstone of infection prevention and control and safe surgical care. Healthcare-associated infections continue to contribute to prolonged hospital stays, increased costs, and avoidable complications (World Health Organization, 2016). While CSSD ensures instrument sterility, compliance alone does not guarantee reliable service delivery.

Sterile processing is not only a technical function, but a system-dependent service. It requires alignment between CSSD and clinical demand to support safe surgery, consistent perioperative performance, and surgical throughput.

Reframing the Problem: Beyond Technical Compliance
Traditional sterilization management focuses on technical parameters, equipment validation, and environmental control. These remain essential, but they do not explain why delays and disruptions persist. In many facilities, technical performance is stable. Variation occurs in coordination areas such as workflow standardization, service interfaces, sterile storage, and workforce training. These gaps affect how CSSD connects with clinical services.
CSSD operates as a bridge between reprocessing and patient care. When coordination fails, the impact reaches the operating room. Improving outcomes requires a shift from compliance alone to system alignment and governance.

Demonstrating the Patient Safety Gap
A common operating room situation illustrates the issue. The case is scheduled, the patient is prepared, and the instruments have completed the sterilization cycle. However, one required set is missing or incomplete. The team is forced to wait. The delay increases anesthesia exposure, raises the risk of infection, and disrupts workflow. The sterilization process was completed correctly. The failure occurred in coordination. Patient safety depends on both sterility and availability. Systems that focus only on technical compliance fail to address this gap.

The G-SSIF Framework: A Governance Intelligence Approach
The Gacias Sterilization Systems Intelligence Framework (G-SSIF) addresses these system-level challenges by examining how sterile processing performs within the wider healthcare system rather than as an isolated technical function. The G-SSIF is presented as a conceptual governance framework developed from systems thinking concepts, observations from sterile processing operations, and practical quality improvement experience. While elements of the framework have been applied in operational improvement initiatives, the framework itself has not yet undergone formal validation. Future research is needed to assess its reliability, applicability, and effectiveness across diverse healthcare settings.

The framework is structured around three core intelligence domains: Capability Intelligence, Operational Intelligence, and Governance & Partnership Intelligence. Capability Intelligence encompasses workforce competency, equipment adequacy, and compliance maturity. Operational Intelligence focuses on workflow efficiency, productivity, cost, and performance. Governance & Partnership Intelligence addresses coordination through vendor capability evaluation, service-level agreements, regulatory alignment, and system integration. These domains are supported by an outer layer of AI-Enabled Systems Intelligence and connected through strategic decision pathways that guide organizational decision-making and service delivery models.

At its core, the framework is designed to support healthcare organizations in evaluating and selecting appropriate service models, including in-house, centralized, hybrid, and outsourced approaches. By integrating operational data with governance and performance considerations, it provides a structured basis for planning, coordination, and resource optimization. The AI-enabled intelligence layer further enhances this capability through applications such as demand forecasting based on surgical schedules, predictive maintenance of sterilization equipment, automated compliance monitoring, and centralized coordination of instrument inventory across multiple facilities.

This approach moves beyond individual processes to focus on overall system performance, recognizing that effective coordination plays a critical role in supporting patient safety outcomes.

Figure 1. The Gacias Sterilization Systems Intelligence Framework (G-SSIF)
A governance model integrating system capability, operational performance, coordination, and AI-enabled intelligence to support decision-making and patient safety
Source: Author's original work.

As shown in Figure 1, the framework integrates capability, operations, governance, partnerships, and AI-enabled intelligence within a single system, enabling leaders to align CSSD performance with surgical demand and support more informed decision-making.

What Makes G-SSIF Different

Most CSSD models focus on compliance and internal control. While these elements remain essential, they do not fully reflect how sterile processing systems function under real world operational conditions.

Existing sterilization frameworks and standards, such as AAMI ST79, primarily address technical compliance, sterilization processes, and quality assurance. Similarly, governance and quality improvement models generally concentrate on organizational performance and process optimization. Building on these established perspectives, the G-

SSIF brings together system capability, operational performance, governance coordination, and emerging systems intelligence within a unified sterile processing governance framework.

Rather than viewing sterile processing as a collection of discrete activities, the G-SSIF highlights coordination, connectivity, and system integration. It positions CSSD within a continuous operational workflow that is closely linked to clinical demand and surgical services. This approach supports decision-making informed by operational trends and interdependencies across the system, rather than by isolated events or individual performance measures. By adopting this broader perspective, the G-SSIF recognizes CSSD as an integrated service that contributes directly to overall healthcare system performance.

Practical Application in Sterile Processing Systems

The framework can be applied through structured and consistent actions. Implementation begins by aligning CSSD processes with clinical demand. In practice, this involves tracking instrument readiness at the point of use, aligning sterilization cycles with operating room schedules, and maintaining regular coordination between CSSD and surgical teams. Reducing variation in tray configuration and reviewing delays helps identify recurring issues. Regular review of operational data also supports proactive decision-making by enabling leaders to identify performance trends, allocate resources more effectively, and address potential service disruptions before they affect patient care. When CSSD output is aligned with surgical scheduling, instrument-related delays decrease, improving on-time procedure starts and reducing case delay frequency, supporting workflow stability and patient safety.

Global Relevance and Low-Resource Application

The framework applies across different healthcare settings. In low-resource environments, improving coordination often has greater impact than increasing equipment. Hospitals may face limits in staffing or infrastructure, yet improvements in communication, workflow design, and targeted workforce training can enhance performance without major cost. This enables shared learning and more consistent practice across healthcare systems.

Contribution to Patient Safety

Sterile processing supports every surgical procedure. When it functions well, it is often unnoticed. When it fails, the impact is immediate. Patient safety depends on reliable access to complete and sterile instruments. Delays increase exposure time and disrupt care delivery. Inconsistent supply creates avoidable risk. By improving coordination and aligning CSSD with clinical demand, the G-SSIF framework strengthens service reliability and supports safer surgical outcomes.

Implications for Leadership and System Integration

For healthcare leaders, sterile processing performance reflects how well systems function together. The G-SSIF framework supports decision-making by linking CSSD operations with surgical demand, resource planning, and service reliability

The framework also supports workforce development. By defining capability, coordination, and performance expectations, it guides targeted training and continuous improvement within CSSD teams, enabling shared learning, professional collaboration, and consistent practice across institutions.

Strengthening CSSD at this level improves not only internal workflow but also overall perioperative performance, supporting safer and more efficient surgical systems.

CONCLUSION

Sterile processing is a system-critical service that directly affects surgical outcomes. When coordination fails, patient safety is compromised even when sterilization standards are met. Improving CSSD performance requires better alignment between processes, people, and clinical demand. The Gacias Sterilization Systems Intelligence Framework provides a

structured approach to achieve this. By strengthening coordination and system performance, it supports more reliable service delivery, reduces delays, and contributes to safer patient care.

FUNDING
This essay was not funded by any person or institution.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
None disclosed.

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CITE THIS ARTICLE:

- **APA (7th edition):** Gacias, F. D. (2026, June 21). *Advancing sterile processing through governance intelligence: The G-SSIF framework for improving CSSD coordination, productivity, and patient safety. The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ)*, 2(2). https://doi.org/10.64573/torgj2606006
- **Harvard**: Gacias, F.D., 2026. *Advancing sterile processing through governance intelligence: The G-SSIF framework for improving CSSD coordination, productivity, and patient safety. The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ)*, 2(2). Published 21 June. Available at: https://doi.org/10.64573/torgj2606006
- **Vancouver**: Gacias FD. Advancing sterile processing through governance intelligence: The G-SSIF framework for improving CSSD coordination, productivity, and patient safety. *The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ).* 2026 Jun 21;2(2). https://doi.org/10.64573/torgj2606006
- **MLA (9th edition)**: Gacias, Felixberto Donila. "Advancing Sterile Processing Through Governance Intelligence: The G-SSIF Framework for Improving CSSD Coordination, Productivity, and Patient Safety." *The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ)*, vol. 2, no. 2, 21 June 2026, https://doi.org/10.64573/torgj2606006
- **Chicago (Author-Date)**: Gacias, Felixberto Donila. 2026. "Advancing Sterile Processing Through Governance Intelligence: The G-SSIF Framework for Improving CSSD Coordination, Productivity, and Patient Safety." *The Operating Room Global Journal (TORGJ)* 2 (2), June 21. https://doi.org/10.64573/torgj2606006