Military Medical Training Headquarters

World’s largest medical training complex will train enlisted from all military branches

By Shari L. Biediger

If there was a growth chart for military medical training, San Antonio would be at the 100th percentile.

As a result of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process, an Army medic training facility at Fort Sam Houston was tapped to become the future home for all Department of Defense medical technicians training, setting in motion an effort to develop the world’s largest such school.

The resulting Medical Education & Training Campus (METC) will graduate 47,000 enlisted combat medics, technicians, assistants, therapists, technologists, opticians and other health care specialists for the military health system every year. By comparison, the UT Health Science Center’s School of Health Professions has around 700 students. The average daily METC enrollment is estimated at 9,000 students, who will be choosing from more than 100 courses taught and supported by a staff of 4,000. The Navy and Air Force will each be sending several thousand new trainees; the Coast Guard, some as well.

Most of them will train at the new METC, a collection of facilities not unlike a modern college campus with dorms and classroom buildings. It’s been under construction since 2008. Supporting METC is San Antonio’s Brooke Army Medical Center, or BAMC, at Fort Sam, which will help to sustain 60 accredited education programs — 38 Graduate Medical Education Programs, eight nursing programs, 18 enlisted allied health and medic programs. Clinical training also will go on throughout the San Antonio area, at both civilian and medical clinics and hospitals.

Epic project

Figuring out how to efficiently assign so many trainees to rotations is just one example of a challenge posed by the creation of METC. Because the job could no longer be managed manually, the Military Transformation Task Force (MTTF) recommended the implementation of a computer matching system similar to what the nursing program was using. According to MTTF Co-chair Daniel Perugini, DO, a medical and health care partnership committee spent the last year putting that system in place.

Also in the last year, construction on many of the campus facilities, which will eventually total 1.9 million square feet of space, was completed. In addition to five instructional buildings and labs, running tracks, administration buildings and a student center, the METC campus includes a dining facility that has the largest capacity of any such facility in the Army, and is one of the largest facilities of its kind in the DoD. Over at Camp Bullis, just north of San Antonio, a readiness field training facility for use by METC students is now being developed; it will include 15 buildings. Classes began at the METC last June, and first graduates crossed the stage Nov. 4, 2010 — all four of them pharmacy techs — but the METC is set to open fully Sept. 15.

Maj. Gen. David Rubenstein, commanding general, Army Medical Department Center & School (AMEDDC&S), has described METC as a schoolhouse. “Working with our Air Force and Navy colleagues, the METC is a team effort involving everything from constructing facilities, providing faculty, validating course content and caring for students,” he says. “My role, and the responsibility of the entire AMEDDC&S, is to ensure METC’s success.”

In September 2011, Wilford Hall Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center will be consolidated into one medical region with two integrated campuses known as the:

San Antonio Medical Military Center

SAMMC North: Includes BAMC as the inpatient tertiary care center, providing all inpatient, trauma and emergency medical care. Changes include massive expansion, a new parking garage and a central energy plant.

SAMMC South: Includes a new Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgical Center, scheduled to be completed in 2017, that will replace the old Wilford Hall Medical Center and provide clinical and diagnostic service. The 681,000-square-foot facility will feature four wings, 40 outpatient services and a 1,000-car parking garage.

Did you know?

- The AMEDDC&S will send students to METC, in addition to making sure the medical force is properly structured; envisioning, designing and training medical forces, and running the Noncommissioned Officer Academy.

- The Academy of Health Sciences is our ‘school,’” says Gen. Rubenstein. “It is a very large and very complex schoolhouse that is part vocational institution, part community college, and part major university.” It hosts 315 different programs of instruction; of these, 30 will be taught at METC, while others are taught in Virginia, Florida and Alabama.

Translational military medicine

“As a soldier, I’m constantly amazed, and as a local high school graduate, I’m constantly proud, of the relationship between the military and the City of San Antonio,” says Gen. Rubenstein.

“It’s a relationship that goes back to 1845 when the Army established a hospital in a rented house across the street from what is today the Marriott River Center. “From those days to these, the Army medical presence in San Antonio has grown to the point where Fort Sam Houston became the home of Army medicine,” he says.

In fact, the area’s long-standing Graduate Medical Education program run by the San Antonio Uniformed Services Health Education Consortium, which trains primarily physicians, specialists, fellows and officers through programs at BAMC, Wilford Hall and other San Antonio hospitals, gets better due to BRAC.

“This system will build upon the great partnering that’s already been taking place,” says Maj. Gen. Byron Hepburn, 59th Medical Wing Commander, and newly named director of the San Antonio Military Health System.

“We have nothing close to this anywhere else in the nation. With these surgeons
and the intensity of this program, they are doing really incredible work, really first class.”

Adds Dr. Perugini:

“The consolidation of Wilford Hall and BAMC into one San Antonio Military Medical Center actually co-locates the Consortium’s residencies, and the residency programs are strengthened because staffing and teaching has improved.”

And though that effort does not directly involve the METC organization, which is led today by Rear Admiral Bob Kiser, it has a similar impact on the city’s future.

“San Antonio benefits because we have a robust pipeline of medical professionals, both civilian and military,” says Dr. Perugini. “If you train people local, they stay, either because they are from San Antonio or because they grow to like it here. But there’s a benefit more long term as well. If you provide clinical rotations for Army, Navy, Air Force, they fall in love with San Antonio because they tend to think lovingly of the place they trained.”

And, even though the “salvage rate” (which translates into lives saved) in current combat zones compared to previous ones is considered phenomenal, explains Perugini, the benefits are not limited to sailors, airmen and soldiers.

“You just read the headlines and the story of the congresswoman shot in Tucson, and look at the connection there. Physicians heading up that team have military experience overseas in the war,” says Dr. Perugini. “The physicians they flew in to help brought that experience with them, and performed techniques they developed in war, and look at the success they are having in her recovery.”

Many say that BRAC legislation will forever change the way the U.S. military delivers health care.

Gen. Rubenstein agrees: “The expansion of our health care, medical research, and training and education missions will increase military medicine’s positions as a significant science and economic contributor to the local health care and biosciences industry.”

SHARI L. BIEDIGER is a San Antonio freelance writer.

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Saving Our Soldiers
Fort Sam leads medical charge with BAMC Level 1 Trauma center and ISR burn center

BY SHARI L. BIEDIGER

I t could be said that the Base Realignment and Closure of 2005 (known as BRAC) heralded troop and mission movement, construction and innovation the likes of which the City of San Antonio may not have seen since the time it gave birth to U.S. military aviation in 1910.

A hundred years later, and yet, the same qualities that made Military City USA the best place to launch flight in the defense of our country is today making the city the ideal place to deliver state-of-the-art health care in a changing world.

Simply put, as of last year, San Antonio became the official home of military medicine. And, by this fall, all the pieces will be in place.

“By law, we need to complete BRAC actions by Sept. 15 of 2011, so we are close to the end,” says Dr. CEM Maxwell, deputy director of the San Antonio Joint Program Office, in charge of overall BRAC implementation.

Of the 19 recommendations assigned to San Antonio, some have been completed; others still are under construction. The medical component of BRAC consists of 76 construction and renovation projects in San Antonio. By 2013, the Department of Defense projects spending for this construction to total $3.12 billion.

San Antonio Military Medical Center

One of the most visible of those projects, for miles around actually, is happening beneath several tower cranes over Fort Sam Houston.

When BRAC 2005 recommended consolidating the functions of Wilford Hall Medical Center on Lackland Air Force Base and that of Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) on Fort Sam Houston into one medical region with two integrated campuses, the new San Antonio Military Medical Center (SAMMC) came to look like this:

The SAMMC North Campus, located at Fort Sam, now includes Brooke Army Medical Center as an inpatient tertiary care center and Level 1 Trauma and emergency care center that is one of only 15 such hospitals in the nation. The trauma and emergency center get 4,000 visits a month, and 58 outpatient specialty clinics that sees 1 million patients a year.

METC, or Military Education Training Command, has its campus here as well – all 1.9 million square feet of it, comprising dorms, classrooms, laboratories, administration offices, a fitness center and student activity center, and a dining room.

Also on the North Campus is the world’s first Center for the Intrepid – a 65,000-square-foot physical rehabilitation center for extremely wounded troops; the Troop Medical Clinic; a Primary Care Clinic – opened last fall and staffed with 300 health care professionals; a Dental Clinic, and two Fisher Houses supporting the Warriors in Transition program.

Just this month, the 150,000-square-foot Battlefield Health and Trauma Research Institute opened adjacent to the Institute for Surgical Research on Fort Sam. The ISR provides combat casualty care solutions and develops products for injured soldiers; serves as the center for trauma, burn and critical care, and provides Burn Special Medical Augmentation Response Teams.

It’s the only burn treatment center in the Department of Defense.

Collaborative care

Co-locating these operations is meant to leverage the synergy of clinical care and research activity in battlefield health, and is a move that recognizes BAMC as the only level 1 Trauma Center within the DoD; the U.S. Army Institute of Surgical Research Burn Center as the only burn center within the DoD, and the Medical Education and Training Campus as the military’s center for DoD enlisted medical training.

“We’re very pleased and excited about the ability to integrate the research, the care and the training of so many people under one campus and or post,” says Col. Evan Renz, U.S. Army, director of the Burn Center at ISR. “We are able to share our knowledge and capabilities with the larger community, but we also benefit greatly by having all the resources that exist on one base. We can quickly and effectively meet with or collaborate with not only other Army experts, but with the Air Force and Navy personnel as well, particularly on combat casualty care.”

Renz points to the dental research that’s going on as an example. Formerly located at the Great Lakes Region, the dental trauma and research team, now at BAMC, can join the surgical research team in looking at ways of repairing and regenerating the face and the jaw.

“Most of our casualties sustain multiple injuries, including the face because it’s the least-protected area of the body,” says Renz. “We can leverage the science uncovered, share expertise, educate and develop training, and we can become more efficient, much smarter and have a more wise use of funds, reaping multiple benefits of one project.”

Similar battlefield research projects will be conducted at the Tri-Service Research Laboratory set to open this spring, just north of BAMC.

Over at Lackland, or SAMMC South Campus, a new $441 million Wilford Hall Ambulatory Surgery Clinic will take the place of Wilford Hall’s hospital, and provide primary care; urgent care for trainees and other beneficiaries; medical, pediatric and surgical subspecialty clinics, and a new center for excellence in eye care. Construction on the first wing of the three-story, state-of-the-art clinic starts next month, and the facility will be complete in late 2017. That’s when the old Wilford Hall meets the wrecking ball.

Wilford Hall, Renz emphasizes, is not closing down. But the old facility won’t likely be missed as the new ambulatory surgery center will be a large, very holistic center, according to Hepburn.

“We are transforming to something better. We want to make sure our beneficiaries are here to have timely access to care, so they’ll have this facility here, and we will be working synergistically with all of SAMMC,” says Hepburn.
Military City U.S.A. & BRAC

MILITARY CITY U.S.A. & BRAC

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“I see a big push to integrate care in San Antonio,” says Col. Evan Renz, U.S. Army, director of the Burn Center at the Institute for Surgical Research. “The goal of the system is to make sure we have integrated, coordinated care,” he says.

In this case, the military is serving up big slices on all of the city’s fastest growing industry: Health care.

SHARI L. BIEDIGER is a San Antonio freelance writer.

BAMC:
A more than $800 million upgrade to the hospital expanded it by 726,000 sf, including a seven-story tower and a six-story parking garage.

—the Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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Supporting Wounded Soldiers: An Alamo City Expertise

“The best part of the job here is getting to know patients and their families,” says Col. Evan Renz, U.S. Army, director of the Burn Center at the Institute for Surgical Research.

Over the years, many soldiers recovering from battle injuries stay connected to BAMC and San Antonio for the rest of their lives, receiving care, retiring to live and work in the community, and very often, giving back themselves. “Many patients volunteer to participate in studies to improve care for the next generation,” says Renz.

The network of services usually begins with the Warrior Transition Battalion, which provides command and control, primary care, case management, leadership, training, accountability, administration, professional development, health, safety and welfare of wounded and their families, assigned to the battalion.

A large part of providing welfare for families comes from the Fisher Houses, low-cost, home-away-from-home temporary lodging for injured and sick soldiers’ family members. The Fisher Houses, usually located within walking distance of a military or VA hospital, are constructed and supported by private donations. Four of the Army’s 27 Fisher Houses exist at Fort Sam Houston. Lackland AFB has three near Wilford Hall Medical Center.

Two of the newest Fisher Houses sit near the Center for the Intrepid — called the world’s most technologically advanced rehabilitation center for amputees and burn victims — that opened on the base in 2007. As one of only two DoD centers for amputees, the Intrepid is a 65,000-square-foot facility that includes clinical and research space, a gait lab, indoor running track, two-story climbing wall and a prosthetic fabrication lab.

Medical care at the Intrepid is directed by the Physical Medicine service at BAMC, and though its day-to-day operations are funded by the Army, it was built by donations from over 600,000 Americans.

One year after Intrepid opened its doors, the new Warrior and Family Support Center also opened up to provide a place of healing for both wounded soldiers and their families. The 12,140-square-foot facility includes a game room, dining room and kitchen facilities, private counseling rooms, a gym, a large living room and a barbecue pavilion. The hospitality they find there is second nature. “San Antonio has a superb reputation for providing a welcoming and accepting environment for combat casualties,” says Renz. “Our patients tell us repeatedly they find they are so rapidly integrated into the fabric of San Antonio.”

— BY SHARI L. BIEDIGER