CLAIMS

1. A container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments during a medical procedure, the container having an elongated body defining a longitudinal axis and comprising:

a first side wall, a second side wall, a first end wall, a second end wall, a bottom wall, and a top edge opposite the bottom wall, the top edge forming a perimeter that defines a top opening into the container, the first and second side walls, first and second end walls and bottom wall collectively defining a receptacle configured to receive at least one surgical instrument through the top opening;

the receptacle comprising:

a first longitudinal recess for storing a first surgical instrument in a partially shielded position, the first longitudinal recess comprising:

a first finger well comprising a pair of opposing side surfaces and a bottom surface, the side surfaces spaced apart from one another to define an enlarged first width;

a first instrument slot intersecting a portion of the first finger well, the first instrument slot comprising a first support surface that is elevated above the bottom surface of the first finger well; and

a first protective guard surrounding at least a portion of the first instrument slot, the first protective guard defining a reduced second width that is less than the first width of the finger well, the first protective guard configured to shield one or more sections of a first surgical instrument from a user's fingers when the first surgical instrument is deposited into the first instrument slot; and

a second longitudinal recess for storing a second surgical instrument in a partially shielded position in the receptacle above the first longitudinal recess, the second longitudinal recess comprising:

a second finger well comprising a pair of opposing side surfaces and a bottom surface;

a second instrument slot intersecting a portion of the first finger well, the second instrument slot comprising a support surface that is elevated above the bottom surface of the second finger well; and

a second protective guard surrounding at least a portion of the second instrument slot, the second protective guard defining a protective recess configured to shield one or more sections of a second surgical instrument from a user's fingers when the second surgical instrument is deposited into the second instrument slot.

2. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 1, wherein the first protective guard comprises a pair of longitudinal slot walls

extending along the first instrument slot, the slot walls located on opposite sides of the first instrument slot and forming at least one constricted section within the first instrument slot that substantially prevents insertion of a user's fingers into the at least one constricted section.

3. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 2, wherein the at least one constricted section comprises a first constricted section located on a first end of the first finger well, and a second constricted section on a second end of the first finger well opposite the first end of the finger well.

4. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 3, wherein at least one of the first constricted section and the second constricted section is recessed below the support surface of the second instrument slot.

5. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 3, wherein the second protective guard comprises at least one pocket having a length dimension parallel to the longitudinal axis of the container and a width dimension perpendicular to the longitudinal axis of the container, the width dimension being greater than the length dimension.

6. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 1, further defining a central plane that is parallel to and equidistant from the first side wall and second side wall of the container, the central plane extending generally perpendicular to the bottom wall of the container, the first longitudinal recess and the second longitudinal recess each having a geometry that is symmetrical with respect to the central plane.

7. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 1, further comprising a base portion attachable to the receptacle to form an enclosure beneath the bottom wall of the receptacle, the enclosure configured for securely storing and disposing of surgical instruments and components after a medical procedure.

8. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 7, wherein the base portion comprises an interior portion containing or defining at least one of:

at least one element configured to receive sharps;

at least one magnetic pad configured to attract and adhere to metal blades;

at least one scalpel blade receptacle configured to remove a scalpel blade from a scalpel handle and retain said scalpel blade in an enclosed area; and

at least one cutout pocket configured to receive one or more surgical instruments.

9. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 7, wherein the receptacle comprises a first locking element, and the base portion comprises a second locking element configured to engage the first locking element to lock the base portion to the receptacle and completely enclose the interior portion of the base portion.

10. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 7, wherein the base portion defines a ledge around a perimeter of the base portion for supporting the receptacle on the base portion.

11. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 10, wherein the ledge comprises a longitudinal track extending along two sides of the base portion, the receptacle slidingly received onto the ledge via the longitudinal track.

12. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 11, wherein the receptacle is slidable along the track of the base portion between an unlocked position, in which the first locking element is disengaged from the second locking element to allow the receptacle to be lifted off of the base portion, and a locked position, in which the first locking element is engaged with the second locking element to prevent the receptacle from being lifted off of the base portion.

13. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 7, wherein the base portion comprises a body portion and a handle portion extending outwardly from the body portion, the handle portion configured to be gripped by a user to manually support the base portion with or without the receptacle attached to the base portion.

14. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 5, wherein the at least one pocket comprises a plurality of narrow compartments arranged in series, each narrow compartment being surrounded by side walls configured to partially enclose a suture needle, each narrow compartment further comprising a length dimension parallel to the longitudinal axis of the container and a width dimension greater than the length dimension, wherein when a suture holder instrument holding a suture needle is placed in the second instrument slot, the suture needle is received in one of the narrow compartments and enclosed by the side walls to shield the suture needle from a user's fingers.

15. The container for safe handling and exchange of surgical instruments of claim 1, further defining a longitudinal median and a series of flat bottom walls arranged laterally with respect to the longitudinal median such that each of the series of bottom walls is spaced at a distance from the top edge of the container, the distances from the top edge decreasing as the bottom walls progress outwardly from

the longitudinal median, the bottom walls forming a step configuration comprising a series of steps lateral to and on each side of the longitudinal median for supporting a handle of the second surgical instrument.