

## Research Assessment #5

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**Subject:** Post-Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU)

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Www.trustedhealth.com, www.trustedhealth.com/blog/what-is-the-pacu.

### **Assessment:**

After hearing about the Post-Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU) from both Dr. Khan and Dr. Waheed, I was curious to learn more about the PACU. Through my conversation with Dr. Khan, I had an idea what the PACU was, but through shadowing Dr. Waheed, I was truly able to see what the PACU is, and how quickly complications can arise. After asking Dr. Waheed questions about the PACU, I became interested in learning more.

Contrary to my initial belief, the anesthesiologists, the majority of the time, do not take much care of the patient in the PACU. After the operating room (OR), the OR nurse, and sometimes the anesthesiologist, will transport the patient to the PACU. Once in the PACU, the PACU nurses are responsible for taking care of the patient. The article mainly pertains to PACU nurses, but I felt it important to know who I would work with in the future. Once they receive the patient, they will immediately hook the patient to vitals, closely mirroring what the OR looked minutes prior. The PACU is an extension of the OR, allowing the patient a separate room to wane off the anesthesia and quietly recover. The PACU nurse is always on the lookout for possible complications, preparing for the worst.

This information is key in understanding how anesthesiologists aren't actually in the PACU but are still responsible. The PACU nurses look to the anesthesiologist if complications arise, and it's the anesthesiologist's job to ensure they keep everyone calm while ensuring the patient stays safe and resolves the complication. The anesthesiologist is well versed in the patient's medical history, as well as the nurses, but the anesthesiologist should know the patient the best since they are the ones who administer anesthesia to the patient. I saw this play out when I shadowed Dr. Waheed, who had just transferred a four-year-old boy to the PACU. The nurses started taking his vitals when his oxygen levels began to drop. Calmly, Dr. Waheed spent an extra 10 minutes with the boys to supply oxygen to the boy ensuring the boy wakes up. I couldn't even tell anything was amiss until Dr. Waheed told me afterward. Dr. Waheed remained calm the entire time, and he said the nurses remained calm as well due to his calmness.

The PACU is regularly used for patients who are undergoing general anesthesia and are unconscious during surgery. The PACU is close to the OR and is easily accessible, so the patient can be rolled into a bed and transported to the PACU. The PACU is an extension of the OR so patients can recover, anesthesiologists can attend to other cases, and highly trained nurses can take care of the patients. This makes the anesthesiologists' job easier and allows the patient a safe space to wake up.

This research is highly valuable and can allow me to prepare for what I can expect in the future. This also made me excited to find a mentor because I can shadow them and become even more curious about aspects of the job. This also opens up more research topics in the field of anesthesia.

## **Article Transcript:**

*Note: All annotations will be in red, italicized, and in Times New Roman font. Key ideas will also be highlighted.*

### **What is a Post-Anesthesia Care Unit (PACU)?**

A Post Anesthesia Care Unit or PACU is a critical care unit and specialty that focuses on the recovery and treatment of patients immediately following surgical procedures and anesthesia *so patients do not recover in the operating room*. PACU nurses are responsible for the recovery of the patient following their procedure and have a variety of knowledge and skills due to the wide range of patients seen in a PACU. Their main focus is monitoring and treating complications that may arise from the procedure and anesthesia. Here is an overview of this dynamic unit!

#### **What is a Post-Anesthesia Care Unit?**

The PACU is a unique area of the hospital where patients go immediately after surgical procedures, or procedures requiring anesthesia, for recovery. It is usually adjacent to the OR suites and procedural areas *when I shadowed Dr. Waheed, I was able to see patients being transported by the anesthesiologist and nurse to the PACU*. Patients arrive in this unit immediately postoperatively to be carefully monitored for any surgical complications or any complications as they recover from the effects of anesthesia. The PACU staff *I was mistaken in my thoughts that the anesthesiologist is solely responsible for the patient post-operatively, but the majority in PACU are nurses* have the goal of stabilizing the patient postoperatively and

safely recovering them for either transfer to an inpatient unit or their later discharge to home. They will monitor the patient's surgical incision and dressing, treat pain and nausea, administer ordered medications such as antibiotics, ensure follow up labs or tests such as xrays are completed, and confirm floor orders are placed for the patient before transferring to an inpatient unit.

### **What types of cases are covered in the Post-Anesthesia Care Unit?**

A very wide variety of postoperative cases are seen in the PACU, depending on the facility that you are working at! Any surgical cases, for the most part, will first come to the PACU for monitoring before being transferred to another unit- so PACU nurses see all different types of surgical patients! A PACU nurse can recover anything from very minor podiatric surgery, appendectomies, to craniotomies and orthopedic traumas, as well as patients of all ages, from infancy through adulthood, *typically, anesthesiologists that practice general anesthesia also operate on all ages, and a wide variety of surgery types* all in the same shift! This makes for some very exciting shifts! Nurses in a PACU may also recover patients who did not have surgery but required anesthesia, an example being patients who require anesthesia for an MRI *this could be something to look into!* The PACU is a very versatile unit and no two days are ever the same! Nurses who chose this area usually enjoy the variety and challenges of such a versatile unit!

## What types of patients are cared for in the Post-Anesthesia Care Unit?

The PACU differs from other units in that patients are typically not remaining in the PACU for an extended length of time, making it very fast paced! Patient's stay in this unit until they **meet criteria for safe transfer or discharge** *also something to look into if it varies from case to case* This could be anywhere from less than an hour to eight plus hours for major surgeries that involve complications. In addition, due to the effects of anesthesia- **your patients may not even remember their time spent under your care in this unit!** Nonetheless, the PACU plays a very important and integral role in any surgical patient's hospital stay and recovery!

Complications can arise quickly in the postoperative period *when I shadowed Dr. Waheed, one patient wasn't receiving enough oxygen, and Dr. Waheed had to stay with this patient much longer than expected in the PACU, so complications do arise often* so it is important for a PACU nurse to be vigilant in their monitoring of the patient and that they are ready to intervene quickly! The goal of the PACU is to ensure the patient is stabilized post operatively before safely transferring the patient to their final unit or discharging home. The PACU staff has a **rigid set of criteria** they follow to ensure that the patient is adequately recovered, stabilized, and is safe to transfer. Any complications as well as a patient's pain and nausea *nausea can also be very dangerous when unconscious, especially when intubated* must also be under control and treated prior to being

transferred to another inpatient unit or their final recovery stop prior to being discharged to home.

### **What does a Post-Anesthesia Care Unit nurse do?**

When a patient first arrives in PACU, they are hooked up to continuous monitors and the main priority of the nurse is maintaining the patient's airway. Since they are still under the effects of anesthesia, a patient may still be intubated, have an oral or nasal airway in place, or require certain maneuvers to keep their airway patent. The anesthesiologist is responsible for giving a safe handoff report of the patient at this time, including a patient's history and any complications that arose during the case. An initial set of vital signs helps the nurse to identify any potential complications that may require treatment. The nurse also conducts an initial assessment of the patient's surgical site and dressing and receives a safe handoff from the OR nurse *so OR and PACU nurses are different*. Throughout the patient's stay and recovery in PACU, the nurse will continue close monitoring for complications and assess and treat the patient for any pain or nausea they may be experiencing as a result of the procedure and anesthesia.

A PACU nurse typically sees patient ratios of 1:1 or 1:2. This allows for the careful monitoring needed during this important time in a patient's recovery. It also allows for the nurse to be able to quickly identify any changes in the patient's condition and intervene quickly should complications arise *so both the*

*PACU nurse and anesthesiologist are always prepared for complications.* Teamwork is very important in the PACU as the nurses often work together to treat complications. A PACU nurse must also have strong interdisciplinary communication in order to work with the surgical team and anesthesia closely in order to see best outcomes for the patients in their care.

PACU nurses oftentimes have diverse backgrounds from many different areas of the hospital and most PACU nurses **have a critical care background.** Because of the fast paced nature of the unit, nurses should be comfortable responding quickly to status changes of the patients and be prepared to learn a wide range of skills due the variety of surgical patients cared for each day!

There is no one path to becoming a PACU nurse but it is often important to have a critical care background! Nurses who are interested in working in PACU often begin in ICU positions and many places require you to have at least one year of critical care experience. PACU nurses must be BCLS certified but usually also require ACLS/PALS certification. *This section about how to become a PACU nurse doesn't interest me, but it's definitely something to look into as a future anesthesiologist, being aware of other careers I would work closely with.*