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# Snapshots of Life in the PACU

By Uriel Dualos RN, BSN and Angela White RN, BSN, CPAN

**P**icture yourself waking up after surgery... Nauseated, blurry eyed, in pain, and unsure where you are. And then you see a figure in blue scrubs. She holds your hand, reminds you where you are, holds an emesis basin close by and makes the nausea and pain dissipate. She calls your family to come sit with you and tucks you in with a warm blanket. You feel reassured and comforted.

This is one of the countless roles of the PACU nurse. She keeps a watchful eye on both of her patients as they emerge from anesthesia, ensuring that their physiological and emotional needs are met. From the most essential airway management to blood pressure interventions, monitoring drains to easing anxiety, the PACU nurse needs to be knowledgeable, skillful, and versatile.

## “It’s the best job in nursing!”

You might say that about your job, but what other nursing job lets you care for such a diverse population of patients? The PACUs at UCSD keep nurses stimulated with a variety of patients, from carpal tunnel surgeries to craniotomies, pediatrics to geriatrics, and everything in between.

It’s an environment that is continuously evolving with endless learning opportunities. We care for patients who have undergone new procedures, such as alcohol sclerotherapy to treat a facial AV malformation done with MRI guidance for the first time at UCSD. For this patient, the new treatment could mean a better cosmetic result and a more normal life.

It is the patients who make all our efforts worthwhile. We are lucky to have

had some amazing patients in the PACU who have given the staff perspective and insight. I will always remember a patient that I cared for several times who lost her foot in a traumatic accident. She joked that, “My husband said I had big feet anyway!” She continued on a serious note, “I could have lost everything, I’m thankful that it was just my foot.”

In addition to exposure to new technology and our wonderful patients, the PACU is a great place to work because of our resources. Anesthesia personnel such as attending physicians, residents, and CRNAs (Certified Nurse Anesthetists) are always available and accessible to help when we need them. This close relationship benefits our patients greatly because their needs can be met quickly. Furthermore, it’s reassuring to know that if you need help there is always someone close by who is happy to assist.

## Does continuity of care exist in the PACU?

While we meet many of our patients just once, we also care for patients who require multiple surgeries. Week after week we assist these patients to wake up comfortably from their anesthesia, paying close attention to what medications were most effective during their last recovery, and striving to make each PACU stay better than the last.

When possible, our nurses request to care for patients that they are familiar with. It gives the patient comfort to see a familiar face and gives the nurse familiarity with the patient’s needs. We try hard to provide this service for the majority of Dr. Harrell’s pulmonology patients who often return every three months for treatment. Every Wednesday



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**Angela White RN, BSN, CPAN** has been a nurse for six years and has been working at UCSD Hillcrest in the PACU for 2 years. She earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Nursing from Northeastern University in Boston. She obtained her CPAN certification in May 2010 and was promoted to CNIII in July 2010.

morning when Dr. Harrell does his bronchoscopy procedures our staff works together to arrange for each patient to be recovered by a nurse who knows them. This familiarity is important not only to the patient, but to the families as well. When the parents of a pediatric burn patient know that they will have the same nurse wake up their child after surgery they are comforted and reassured while they anxiously wait to see their child after surgery.

### **Frustration!!**

Patient flow can be a challenge in the PACU. At times there can be a lack of beds and/or nurses to care for the constant inflow of patients. It's a trying job to be in charge, turning down patients from the OR, Interventional Radiology, Electrophysiology, and other outlying areas until there is enough room for the next patient.

The wait for an inpatient bed is frequently the culprit for delays. Though we work with the Nursing Supervisor to find beds for our patients, sometimes our only option is to hold them in our PACU until beds become available. These longer waits have been a source of patient dissatisfaction, so the PACU nurses pooled resources to donate two DVD players, headphones, and a DVD library for our patients to use while they wait. Our post-implementation surveys have shown that both patients and staff have found the distraction to be an effective way of passing the time.

In addition to helping our patients pass the time, we are actively working to decrease the time they have to wait for their floor or unit bed. We track bed waits monthly, assess the reason for the wait, and work with our management team in an effort to decrease our wait times.

### **A Tight-Knit Group**

Have you ever had to work a full shift, go home for a few hours then return for another full shift? When the OR is busy all night, so are the On-Call PACU nurses, which means that our staff members spend a lot of time together! As a result, we have developed into a close group that helps and relies on each other.

While we practice total patient care during Phase I recovery of our patients, each nurse looks out for every patient in the PACU, lending a hand whenever it's needed. We know that patients can see this unique relationship and recognize our team work from the results of our post-op surveys. Two of our PACU nurses randomly contact patients at home after their surgeries to ask them to rate their experience. We consistently receive high marks for the high quality care and attention we give to all of our patients.

### **Our New Space**

Described by our Nurse Manager,

Esther Lee, as "the Rolls-Royce of PACUs," the newly renovated Main PACU and Pre-Op areas opened in September of last year. Since then both staff and patients have enjoyed a bright and spacious recovery environment. With twelve standard bed spaces, two isolation rooms, and five "swing" beds, we are equipped to care for our patients in an attractive area with brand new equipment.

We invite all nurses to come take a look at our beautiful space and to learn about what we are doing every day to improve nursing at UC San Diego! It really is the best job in the nursing!

