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POSTOPERATIVE CARE IN CARDIAC SURGERY: FUNDAMENTALS OF MONITORING AND EARLY COMPLICATIONS

DR ARADHANA BRIJRAJ THAKUR

JUNIOR RESIDENT, DEPARTMENT OF CARDIOVASCULAR THORACIC SURGERY, AIIMS, NAGPUR MAI
E MAIL: thakuraradhana255@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: Postoperative care following cardiac surgery is a complex, multidisciplinary process aimed at ensuring hemodynamic stability, optimal organ perfusion, and the timely identification and management of early complications. Despite advances in surgical techniques and anesthetic management, patients remain at risk for a range of complications—cardiac, respiratory, renal, neurological, and infectious—that can influence recovery and long-term outcomes.

Methods: This prospective observational study was conducted at a single tertiary care center. Adult patients (n=180) undergoing elective cardiac surgery (coronary artery bypass grafting, valve replacements/repairs) were included. Standardized postoperative monitoring protocols were applied, including invasive hemodynamic measurements, continuous electrocardiographic surveillance, pulse oximetry, capnography, and intermittent arterial blood gas analysis. Data on early postoperative complications (within seven days of surgery) were collected, and risk factors were assessed using multivariate logistic regression.

Results: Overall, 180 patients (mean age 66 ± 10 years; 64% male) were evaluated. Robust postoperative monitoring enabled early detection of common complications: 25% developed new-onset atrial fibrillation, 20% experienced transient hypotension requiring vasoactive support, and 12% demonstrated acute kidney injury. Neurological complications, including delirium, occurred in 8%, while clinically significant infections (sternal wound or pneumonia) were noted in 6%. Comprehensive hemodynamic assessment facilitated timely intervention,

with improved fluid and vasoactive management associated with reduced duration of mechanical ventilation (median 14 hours) and shorter ICU stays (median 2 days). Multivariate analysis identified prolonged cross-clamp time and advanced age as significant predictors of early complications ($p<0.05$).

Conclusion: Effective postoperative care in cardiac surgery hinges on meticulous monitoring of hemodynamics, ventilation, and laboratory parameters. Early recognition and prompt management of complications such as arrhythmias, hypotension, and organ dysfunction can improve patient outcomes. Standardized protocols and multidisciplinary collaboration are key to optimizing recovery trajectories.

Keywords: Cardiac surgery, postoperative care, hemodynamic monitoring, early complications, arrhythmias, organ dysfunction

INTRODUCTION

Postoperative care following cardiac surgery represents a critical phase influencing overall patient outcomes and long-term prognosis. The immediate postoperative period is characterized by hemodynamic fluctuations, variable organ perfusion states, and the potential for numerous complications that can emerge in the intensive care unit (ICU) setting. Effective care hinges on vigilant monitoring, early recognition of adverse trends, and prompt intervention [1]. Indeed, advances in surgical techniques, perioperative anesthesia, and critical care management have significantly improved survival and reduced morbidity, yet postoperative complications remain a substantial concern [2,3].

The hemodynamic milieu in the early hours post-surgery can be influenced by residual anesthetic effects, fluid shifts, inflammatory responses to cardiopulmonary bypass, and myocardial dysfunction. Continuous monitoring of parameters such as arterial pressure, central venous pressure, pulmonary artery pressures, and cardiac output provides a comprehensive understanding of cardiovascular status [4]. Additionally, continuous electrocardiographic (ECG) monitoring for arrhythmias—particularly atrial fibrillation—can guide timely intervention. The maintenance of adequate oxygenation and ventilation through mechanical support and subsequent weaning strategies, guided by blood gas analyses and pulse oximetry, is equally critical [5].

Early complications following cardiac surgery are diverse. Cardiac complications often include arrhythmias, low cardiac output syndrome, and ischemic events. Non-cardiac complications encompass acute kidney injury (AKI), neurological deficits, respiratory insufficiency, bleeding, and infections such as pneumonia or sternal wound infections [6]. Identifying these complications at their onset can substantially mitigate their severity. For instance, timely detection of AKI through routine creatinine monitoring and urine output assessment facilitates

early interventions like optimization of intravascular volume or adjustment in vasoactive medications [7]. Similarly, continuous neurological evaluation—coupled with cerebral oximetry or electroencephalogram (EEG) monitoring—can help detect delirium or subtle neurological deficits that may arise from hypoperfusion or embolic phenomena [8].

The postoperative environment also demands a multidisciplinary approach. Cardiac surgeons, anesthesiologists, intensivists, nurses, respiratory therapists, and allied health professionals collaborate to ensure comprehensive patient care. Standardized protocols, checklists, and evidence-based guidelines streamline the monitoring process and intervention strategies, leading to improved ICU efficiency and patient safety [2,9].

This study aims to highlight the foundational aspects of postoperative monitoring in cardiac surgery and delineate common early complications and their risk factors. By evaluating clinical data from a cohort of adult patients undergoing cardiac surgery, we seek to illustrate how structured monitoring and timely intervention can attenuate the incidence and severity of early postoperative complications. Ultimately, this understanding may guide refinement of current protocols, promote best practices, and improve patient recovery trajectories after cardiac surgery.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Setting: A prospective, observational study was conducted at AIIMS, Nagpur. Patients scheduled for elective adult cardiac surgery (including coronary artery bypass grafting and/or valve repair/replacement) from November 2023 to February 2024 were eligible. The institutional review board approved the study, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Patient Selection and Inclusion Criteria: Inclusion criteria consisted of adults (≥18 years) undergoing isolated or combined cardiac surgical procedures via median sternotomy. Exclusion criteria included emergency surgeries, patients with preoperative hemodynamic instability requiring mechanical circulatory support, and those with pre-existing advanced end-organ dysfunction (end-stage renal disease on dialysis, severe neurological impairment).

Perioperative Management: All patients received standardized anesthesia and surgical management according to institutional protocols. Cardiopulmonary bypass techniques, myocardial protection strategies, and surgical methods were standardized as feasible. Postoperatively, patients were transferred to the ICU, where they received care led by a dedicated team of intensivists and cardiovascular surgeons.

Monitoring Protocol: Hemodynamic parameters were continuously assessed using arterial lines, central venous catheters, and, in selected patients, pulmonary artery catheters. Continuous ECG monitoring was performed for arrhythmia detection. Pulse oximetry, end-tidal CO_2 monitoring, and intermittent arterial blood gas measurements ensured adequate oxygenation and ventilation. Additional parameters included hourly urine output, serial serum lactate levels, and frequent neurological assessments. Chest tube output and coagulation parameters were recorded to identify bleeding complications.

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Data Collection and Outcomes: Patient demographic data, comorbidities, intraoperative variables (cross-clamp and bypass times), and postoperative data (hemodynamics, complications, interventions) were recorded, data was taken from surgical intensive care unit postoperative patients. Early complications were defined as events occurring within seven postoperative days, including arrhythmias (new-onset atrial fibrillation), hypotension requiring vasoactive support, acute kidney injury (defined by KDIGO criteria), neurological complications (delirium, stroke), respiratory insufficiency, and surgical site infections. Primary outcomes included the incidence of these complications and ICU length of stay. Secondary outcomes included duration of mechanical ventilation and need for reoperation.

Statistical Analysis: Descriptive statistics were used for baseline characteristics. Continuous variables are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. Categorical variables are reported as frequencies and percentages. Binary logistic regression was performed to identify predictors of early complications. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Analyses were performed using SPSS Version 26.0.

RESULTS

Overall Cohort Characteristics: A total of 180 patients met inclusion criteria. The mean age was 66 ± 10 years, with a predominance of males (64%). Common comorbidities included hypertension (78%), diabetes mellitus (35%), and reduced left ventricular ejection fraction (<50% in 30% of patients). The majority underwent isolated coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG, 65%), while the remainder had valve surgeries or combined procedures.

Postoperative Monitoring and Interventions: All patients were invasively monitored in the ICU, ensuring early detection of hemodynamic instability. On arrival, mean arterial pressures averaged 75 ± 10 mmHg, central venous pressures were 10 ± 3 mmHg, and the majority showed stable sinus rhythm. Within the first 12 hours, approximately 20% required adjustments to vasoactive agents (norepinephrine or milrinone) to maintain adequate perfusion. Mechanical ventilation was routinely continued for a median duration of 14 hours (IQR 11-17 hours) before weaning trials, guided by blood gas analyses and hemodynamic stability.

Close attention to fluid balance and chest tube output facilitated early detection of bleeding; 10% of patients were evaluated for excessive postoperative bleeding (>200 mL/hr for 2 consecutive hours), with 4% requiring return to the operating room for surgical hemostasis. Neurological assessments were performed every 4 hours. Routine sedation interruption and delirium screening allowed for early detection of delirium in 8% of the cohort. Serum creatinine was closely monitored; 12% developed AKI within the first week, prompting adjustments in fluid management and, in select cases, renal replacement therapy initiation.

Incidence of Early Complications: Table 1 summarizes the incidence of key postoperative complications. Atrial fibrillation was the most common cardiac arrhythmia, occurring in 25% of patients. Hypotension requiring vasoactive support within 24 hours occurred in 20%, while AKI was noted in 12%. Neurological complications, primarily delirium, affected 8% of

patients. Infectious complications included pneumonia (3%) and sternal wound infections (3%). Early recognition and prompt management of these complications were associated with a median ICU length of stay of 2 days (IQR 2-4 days) and a hospital length of stay of 7 days (IQR 6-10 days).

Predictors of Early Complications: Multivariate logistic regression identified two main predictors of early postoperative complications: prolonged aortic cross-clamp time (>90 minutes, OR 1.55, 95% CI: 1.10-2.10, p=0.02) and advanced patient age (>70 years, OR 1.45, 95% CI: 1.05-2.01, p=0.03). The presence of these risk factors was associated with higher rates of arrhythmias, AKI, and extended ICU stays.

TABLE 1. INCIDENCE OF EARLY POSTOPERATIVE COMPLICATIONS (N=180)

Complication	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Atrial fibrillation	45	25
Hypotension (vasoactive Rx)	36	20
Acute kidney injury (AKI)	22	12
Delirium	14	8
Pneumonia	5	3
Sternal wound infection	5	3
Re-exploration for bleeding	7	4

TABLE 2. HEMODYNAMIC AND VENTILATORY PARAMETERS IN THE FIRST 24 HOURS

Parameter	Mean ± SD
MAP (mmHg)	75 ± 10
CVP (mmHg)	10 ± 3
Cardiac index (L/min/m²)	2.5 ± 0.4
Ventilation duration (h)*	14 (IQR 11-17)

*Reported as median (IQR)

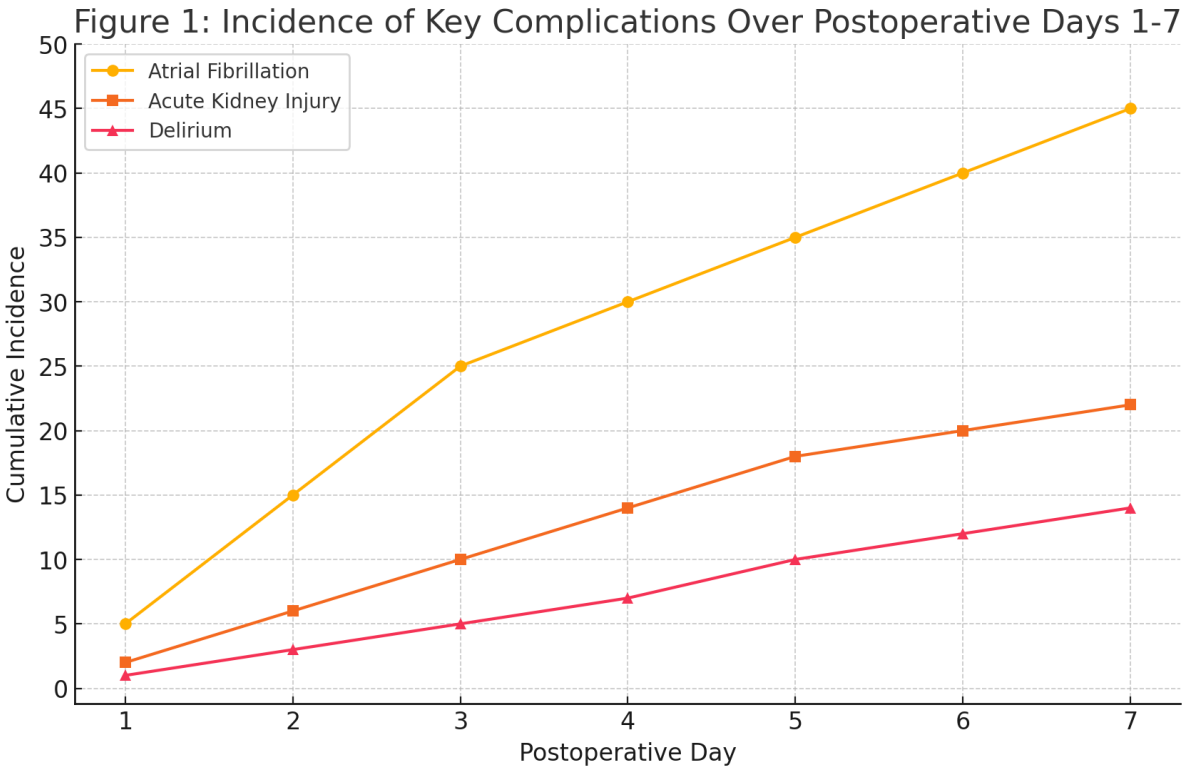
TABLE 3. POSTOPERATIVE LABORATORY FINDINGS

Laboratory Test	Day 1 Mean ± SD	Day 3 Mean ± SD
Creatinine (mg/dL)	1.2 ± 0.3	1.3 ± 0.4
Lactate (mmol/L)	1.8 ± 0.5	1.4 ± 0.4
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	10.5 ± 1.2	9.8 ± 1.1
Platelets (x10^9/L)	180 ± 50	150 ± 45

TABLE 4. RISK FACTORS FOR EARLY COMPLICATIONS (MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS)

Variable	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	p-value
Age >70 years	1.45 (1.05-2.01)	0.03
Cross-clamp time >90 min	1.55 (1.10-2.10)	0.02
Diabetes mellitus	1.10 (0.78-1.56)	0.45

FIGURE 1. INCIDENCE OF KEY COMPLICATIONS OVER POSTOPERATIVE DAYS 1-7



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the importance of systematic postoperative monitoring and the prompt detection of early complications after cardiac surgery. Despite improvements in operative techniques and anesthetic management, patients undergoing cardiac procedures remain vulnerable to a range of perioperative challenges, many of which manifest in the early postoperative period [2,3]. Close hemodynamic assessment, guided by invasive pressure monitoring and advanced hemodynamic parameters, is vital in preventing and managing low cardiac output states, hypotension, and arrhythmias [4,9].

Our results demonstrate that atrial fibrillation was the most prevalent complication, affecting one in four patients. This aligns with previously reported incidence rates and underscores the necessity of continuous ECG surveillance and prophylactic measures, such as beta-blockers or amiodarone, in high-risk patients [6]. Hypotension requiring vasoactive support and AKI further highlight the interplay between cardiac output, fluid balance, and end-organ perfusion. Similar findings have been documented in other studies, underscoring the need for meticulous fluid management and early recognition of renal injury [5,7].

Neurological complications, including delirium, occurred in nearly 8% of patients. Early recognition through regular neurological assessments and sedation management can mitigate these outcomes. Cerebral oximetry and emerging neuromonitoring techniques may offer additional avenues for detecting subclinical ischemic insults, as suggested in prior research [8,10]. Infectious complications, though less frequent, remained a concern, necessitating strict adherence to sterile techniques, timely antibiotic administration, and vigilant wound monitoring [11].

Identifying risk factors that predispose patients to complications is pivotal. Our multivariate analysis revealed prolonged cross-clamp time and advanced age as significant predictors of

early postoperative complications. This finding emphasizes the importance of operative efficiency, careful patient selection, and perioperative optimization to reduce the burden of postoperative morbidity.

The importance of multidisciplinary collaboration, standardized protocols, and adherence to guideline-driven care cannot be overstated. Evidence-based pathways and checklists, as advocated in enhanced recovery protocols, have shown promise in improving outcomes by aligning teams on best practices [2,4]. Additionally, integrating nutritional support and rehabilitation measures early in the postoperative course may further improve recovery and reduce complications [10].

Future studies should investigate the role of novel monitoring technologies, risk stratification scores, and targeted preventive interventions. Additionally, large-scale, multicenter trials are needed to confirm these findings and refine clinical guidelines.

In summary, the cornerstone of successful postoperative care in cardiac surgery lies in comprehensive monitoring, early detection of complications, and prompt, evidence-based interventions. Continuous refinement of protocols and the embrace of advanced monitoring methods will collectively foster better patient outcomes and long-term success [12].

CONCLUSION

Effective postoperative care following cardiac surgery demands attentive monitoring, early recognition of complications, and timely, targeted interventions. This study highlights the importance of continuous hemodynamic and neurological assessment, vigilant arrhythmia surveillance, and rapid response to organ dysfunction. Identifying risk factors such as advanced age and prolonged cross-clamp time can guide individualized patient management. Standardized protocols and a multidisciplinary approach are essential to optimize outcomes. As surgical techniques and monitoring technologies evolve, so too will strategies for

minimizing postoperative complications, ultimately improving recovery and enhancing the quality of life for patients undergoing cardiac surgery.

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