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## *Medicine? Photography? Why not both?*

*by Roberta Sonnino, MD*

**Contributed Service Faculty at Center for Health Policy & Ethics**

Medicine is both a science and an art, but few would take this concept so literally as to include the *art of photography* as a legitimate component of a medical career.

For me, the two have always been inextricably linked. As an academic pediatric surgeon, I have always had a camera close by, usually for the purpose of documenting unusual findings for teaching or for scientific publications. Over the years, especially as high quality, tiny pocket-sized digital cameras became available, this evolved into literally having a camera in my pocket at all times... and we know that having a camera available is the first rule of getting good images! So inevitably, the camera, so conveniently at hand, would be called into action ever more often when a patient made a funny face, or just because the babies we cared for were so cute.

At first it was just for fun – after all, “film was cheap”, and digital images even more so. My pictures would be used for teaching and documentation, but it rarely occurred to me to offer them to the patients and their families. A few received a print as a “thank you” when they allowed me to use images of their children for my first photography exhibit “Fragile Beginnings.”

Then came a turning point in my career, both as a physician and a photographer. As my newborn patients thrived and grew older, families would contact me, years after I had treated their child, to see if by chance I had some images of their baby during those difficult days and nights in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). The time parents spend with their children in the NICU is difficult and emotional. Most families are intimidated by the highly intense, technical setting, and do not usually feel comfortable taking pictures, even if they do have a camera. Yet months and years later, they think back on how far their child has come, and they often wish they had more documentation of those difficult days, now thankfully a distant memory. Most of the time, I am able to provide a few snapshots - certainly not masterpieces. But I learned something very important in that process. The impact of these pictures on the families, and the children themselves, once they are old enough to appreciate their significance, is extraordinary. They provide healing and closure on a difficult time in the child's life.

A few years ago, I retired from clinical practice, having taken on a full time administrative position in the medical school. But I missed the opportunity to play a role in the lives of these tiny patients. Remembering how much the photos of newborns, especially those requiring prolonged NICU stays, were treasured by the families, I decided to start a project I called “NICU Rounds.”

For a premature baby or a newborn that has undergone major surgery, leaving the NICU to go home is a very special moment and an incredible gift to the parents. It became obvious to me that a photographic journal of their baby's NICU stay would be a treasured gift to these families. So a few years ago, I started making “rounds” in the NICU once a week, photographing every baby in the unit. We obtained written consent to take pictures. Despite my having no doctor-patient relationship with the babies, and therefore not knowing these families, the consent was always signed promptly and gratefully. After discharge, a small album was assembled with a few images from each week the baby was in the hospital, and the album was sent to the family. The response has been uniformly of wonder and gratitude. I continue to be amazed at the deep impact of such a small thing!

The baby pictured in *Sleeping Beauty* was born prematurely, but had grown well during her NICU stay, and had reached her day of discharge. Her mother had been staying with her around the clock to get used to her care, and all had been proceeding well - except for burping. The baby was simply not interested (although she did enjoy all the back patting that went along with the efforts), and by far preferred sleeping to any other post-prandial activity. After a gentle but futile battle of wits with her newborn daughter, the mother finally gave in and allowed the baby to settle down and take a nap in the most accessible and convenient location that presented itself – the palm of mom's hand. I had been taking my weekly pictures of the child, so I happened to be right there and was fortunate to capture this precious moment in her life. This picture, with an accompanying “Artist's Statement,” was recently published on the cover of the main journal for the medical education community, *Academic Medicine*. The cover and article can be found at: <http://journals.lww.com/academicmedicine/toc/2011/01000>



*Sleeping Beauty*

At some point, I decided that once my medical career was over, I would become a professional photographer, specializing in medical and children's photography. One final experience sealed this plan. A friend heard about an organization called “Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep” (NILMDTS) and encouraged me to find out more about it.

NILMDTS is a non-profit organization dedicated to infant bereavement photography. When there is a stillborn baby or a newborn that is not expected to survive and leave the hospital, their members are called to do a professional portrait session with the baby and the family, at no cost. The organization was born out of the chemistry between a mother who lost a baby and the photographer who agreed to go to the hospital to take baby and family portraits for them. I joined the organization in 2006. My work was reviewed and I was formally accepted as a professional photographer. I have since done over 50 sessions. The true impact on the healing of these grieving families has not been studied yet, but anecdotally it is huge. The child they have lost remains forever a part of the family through the photos we provide. As a physician, I am often called to explain, in lay terms, what happened to the child. I find myself helping photographers I have never met cope with the experience of seeing and photographing a dead child, something I have experienced many times, but that is very foreign to them.

As a result of these experiences and the encouragement of some master photographers, I recently took and passed the exam to become a CPP (Certified Professional Photographer), in essence, photography “boards.” I still must submit a portfolio of 20 images that fulfill specific criteria before I can add the CPP title after my name. Only about 2500 photographers have completed the certification process – I am halfway there.

So here I am, a medical school administrator, retired pediatric surgeon, and a photographer. Somehow they all seem to fit together. Through my photography I have been able to teach my students the importance of humanism in medicine, I have impacted the patients and their families, and my own practice. Through NILMDTS, I can provide comfort to families that cannot be helped by medicine. To me, the art and science of medicine are intertwined and best illustrated by the images I make.

More on NILMDTS at <http://www.nowilaymedowntosleep.org/>