



Water Immersion in Neonatal Bereavement Photography

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Water immersion is a new technique in neonatal bereavement photography that provides a compelling alternative for perinatal nurses, professional photographers and others who wish to provide keepsakes for families who have experienced the loss of a premature infant. Water immersion appears to be most applicable in second trimester fetal demises—a time when the quality of photographs is often impeded by the very premature nature of the child. The technique involves immersing the neonate in water to obtain photographs. Using only a basin of water and a camera, water immersion photographs closely

resemble how the child would appear in a buoyant intrauterine environment. These pictures often provide greater detail due to the diffusion of light caused by the water and, frequently, a clearer representation of the likeness of the child before he or she was born.

Significance of Neonatal Bereavement Photography

The period following birth or the recent death of a neonate often provides a narrow window of opportunity to obtain pictures and other

Abstract Water immersion in neonatal bereavement photography is a new technique intended to enhance the quality of the photographs provided to families following their loss. Water immersion appears to be most helpful following a second trimester fetal demise. This technique can be used by nurses, professional photographers and others in addition to more traditional neonatal bereavement photography. It does not require special skills or equipment and can be implemented in virtually any perinatal setting. The enhanced quality of photographs produced with this method can potentially provide a source of comfort to grieving families. DOI: 10.1111/1751-486X.12152

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keepsakes to commemorate the brief life of a child. Most perinatal nurses have a good understanding of the importance of bereavement photography for grieving families. While more bereavement research is warranted, existing research has shown that parents place great value on and express appreciation for photographs of their deceased child even when they initially express reticence (Harvey, 2008). In fact, the Pregnancy Loss and Infant Death Alliance (2008) encourages bereavement providers to offer photography as a way of cultivating memories for parents. Photography is also regarded as one of the 14 “Rights of Parents When a Baby Dies,” outlined by Share Pregnancy and Infant Loss Support, Inc. (2012).

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Professional bereavement photography through organizations such as Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep (2014) provides an invaluable opportunity to obtain quality photos during the sensitive period following a perinatal death. Unfortunately, professional photography services aren’t always accessible, reliable or even reasonable in every circumstance. Ultimately, the task of bereavement photography may fall to a nurse with little or no training in bereavement photography.

Parents of deceased neonates express varying degrees of desire to hold, view or participate in photographs offered by nursing staff. Interestingly, it remains a testament of prenatal bonding that so many parents lovingly explore, marvel and linger over the delicate features of their deceased child. Nurses have always played an important role in helping families identify the beautiful or unique physical characteristics of each baby, even under the most difficult circumstances. When significant deterioration, preexisting deformities or extreme prematurity is present, caregivers frequently help families focus on the unique and beautiful characteristics of each child, obtaining pictures that include close-ups of hands and feet or

other physical features. Water immersion in neonatal bereavement photography provides an opportunity to capture a gentler perspective, and can provide opportunities to take photographs that might otherwise have been avoided. This new technique can offer the potential to provide photographs that are less disturbing and are more reminiscent of the child the parent sees in his or her mind’s eye.

Challenges

While caring for families who have endured the loss of their child can be challenging, nurses who have no photographic training (and even those who do) are frequently unsettled about the quality of photos provided to families in their time of grief. Neonates born before the third trimester are frequently ruddy, shiny, fragile and occasionally macerated. Inevitably, increased prematurity makes photographing these babies incredibly difficult. The longer the baby has been deceased, the more difficult the photographing task becomes. Because the time from death to birth can often be days and even weeks, increased photographic (and handling) challenges often include the sloughing of skin and deterioration of the shape of the fetal head (see Figure 1).

The effort in providing quality photos is all the more significant because there remains only a narrow margin of time after which no further opportunities exist to commemorate the existence of the deceased child. It remains a priority, however, to recognize the sensitive time after birth when families often need to hold and explore their deceased babies—a priority that should (ideally) never be usurped by the need to take quality photographs.

Professional photography provides an invaluable service to nurses and families in this critical period. Photographers from organizations like Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep sensitively navigate the needs of the family along with the technical aspects of obtaining quality photographs. Increasingly, professional photographers have the capability of improving the quality of their photographs through photographic software. Photographic software helps to eliminate, soften and alter pictures in a way that increases the quality of the photos. Interestingly, water immersion photography can be a viable addition to the techniques used by

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