



# Water Immersion in Neonatal Bereavement Photography

HEATHER DUFFEY

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

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**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

*Heather Duffey, BSN, RNC-OB, SANE-A, holds bachelor degrees in both integrative arts and nursing. She is a labor and delivery nurse and sexual assault nurse examiner in Idaho Falls, ID. The author reports no conflicts of interest or relevant financial relationships. Address correspondence to: saving-sage@hotmail.com.*

Figure 1.

## Bereavement Photograph Without Water Immersion



This is a typical neonatal bereavement photograph without water immersion. The photo is cropped because the upper portion of the head had collapsed.

Credits: Amilia Rae Haslam, December 17, 2013; photo by Heather Duffey. Photo used with parent's permission.

Figure 2.

## Close-Up of Hands Without Water Immersion



This photo of the baby's hands was taken without water immersion. Compare this to Figure 3, which shows the same child's hands.

Credits: Amilia Rae Haslam, December 17, 2013; photo by Heather Duffey. Photo used with parent's permission.

professional photographers who would otherwise spend more time in their studio painstakingly and carefully altering photographs to create precious memories for grieving families.

## How Water Immersion Works

Water immersion in neonatal bereavement photography works by using principles of science coupled with the knowledge of the 21st century images of intrauterine life. Anyone who has taken photos of deceased preterm babies knows that reflection is frequently a frustrating obstacle when taking pictures of thin, smooth and ruddy skin (see Figure 2). Most people understand water to reflect light and are therefore opposed to the idea of taking photographs with any subject submerged.

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Interestingly, while the surface of water induces reflection (specular light), a diffusion of light within water also occurs in a way that minimizes this reflection and enhances the photograph. The buoyant principles of water that encourage fetal growth during pregnancy also provide a natural environment for bereavement photography. Babies that seem to wilt, wrinkle and sag in an extrauterine environment have a more plumped and softened appearance when immersed in water (see Figure 3). Skin that is otherwise delicate and friable becomes markedly easier to manipulate when immersed.

All of this makes sense in the context that this kind of photography simulates the very environment that a preterm baby was intended to inhabit before he or she died. Many parents today have seen developmental images of babies at varying gestational ages in utero, so it makes sense that submersion photos can provide a closer and more representative glimpse of the baby that they envisioned.

with a macro lens is best for close-up photography; a large number of even simple digital cameras now have this feature.

3. Wait for the water to clear if the tap water is aerated.
4. If this is your first attempt, take all of the photos you would normally take before initiating water immersion photography. It will be most convenient to obtain these photos

Use this as an opportunity to gently remove any dried blood on the baby that would have been more difficult to remove outside of the water.

7. Do not submerge the camera. The composition of the picture and your choice of lens will determine how close to the water you need to position the camera. Experiment with different camera angles to reduce reflection from the surface of the water. This may require the photographer to get fairly close to the surface of the water and experiment with turning off the flash.
8. Consider how you will frame the pictures. Don't be afraid to capture specific parts of the baby like the hands or feet. If the face or head was difficult to photograph outside of the water, note that the buoyancy of the water tends to minimize the folding of facial skin or collapsing of the head.
9. Position the baby in a way that appears natural. By flexing the knees and bending the arms and positioning the hands near the face, a view of how the baby may have appeared in utero is provided.
10. Lift the baby from the water following your photo session and place him or her on a towel to gently blot as needed.

Figure 3.

### Close-Up of Hands With Water Immersion



Credits: Amilia Rae Haslam, December 17, 2013; photo by Heather Duffey. Photo used with parent's permission.

### Steps for Water Immersion

The following steps are recommended when planning for water immersion photography:

1. Talk to the family about the possibility of water immersion and obtain written consent for photography.
2. Obtain a basin of tepid tap water large enough to immerse the baby or simply the hands and feet (depending on the intent). A camera

after you have taken pictures of the baby with the family and in any special clothing.

5. You may find it most helpful to have a gloved assistant support and position the baby during the photo session.
6. With gloved hands, gently place the unclothed baby in the water. Small bubbles of air may cling to the surface of the baby's skin or the container; take the time to lightly run your hand over any surfaces where bubbles remain (see Figure 4).

### Practice Considerations

While water immersion is a technique that can be utilized by both perinatal nurses and professional photographers, additional consideration should be given to include families in this process. In the same way that parents of living newborns are frequently encouraged to participate in their baby's first bath, parents of deceased neonates might appreciate the opportunity to experience water immersion by submerging their own hands in the water and helping to position the baby. Photographs of the parents' hands cradling the child may

Figure 4.

### Close-Up of Feet With Water Immersion



Notice the tiny bubbles that have clung to the surface of the skin.

Credits: Amilia Rae Haslam, December 17, 2013; photo by Heather Duffey. Photo used with parent's permission.

also provide photographs that become cherished memories.

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tual needs of each family member. Exploring family members' thoughts and feelings regarding water immersion may be necessary to be sensitive to the

needs of the family. With increased utilization of the water immersion technique, variations may occur that more closely represent the needs of different cultures, religions, personal and social beliefs.

Consult with your local pathologist if there are any concerns that a particular study may be affected by the water immersion technique. However, the processes of preparing a deceased neonate for autopsy or mortuary services should not be affected by water immersion.

### Conclusion

The death of a child is a difficult time for any family and the death of a pre-term fetus is no exception. In this time of considerable sorrow and stress, the implementation of water immersion in neonatal bereavement photography has the potential to make a significant impact on the quality of photos taken following a fetal death. Professionals

carrying for grieving families can offer water immersion photography as an additional or even alternative method of providing quality keepsake photographs of their child (or children). The uncomplicated nature of the water immersion technique means that perinatal nurses in remote areas with limited resources could have the ability to incorporate this technique into their institutional policies and routine practice. Incorporating this technique into practice is an example of how a simple nursing technique has the potential to have a meaningful impact on patient satisfaction, nursing satisfaction and quality of care. **NWH**

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