



BCA News: Spring 2016

My unique entry into the profession of medical photography

Dr. Afzal Ansary, FBPA

I was born in Uganda and developed interest in photography from a very early age of 11. At the age of 14 I was a proud owner of a Leica 111f and a Rolliflex, which I bought from earning money by photographing school sports activities.



I did not carry my Leica, but I wore it around my neck like a medal and was proud of it. Taking up medical photography never ever crossed my mind. In fact I had not even heard of anything like medical photography.

I was brought up in a small town called Mbale in Uganda at close proximity to a big hill commonly known as 'Mount Nkonkojoro'. It was really a big hill and not a mountain as such. Often I would take a packed lunch, my camera mounted with a yellow filter and a lens hood plus a tripod and go up the hill to take landscape photographs. One of these trips turned out to be the one to carve my future profession.

As usual I started my 'safari' to take photographs. It was a hot day. I sat under a mango tree to have my lunch and a cold drink. The packed lunch consisted of egg and cheese sandwich, pack of crisps, biscuits and a can of cold drink. I was about to have my lunch when I noticed an African woman, bare breasted, tilling land with a pickaxe.

In Africa to have bare breasts is common as breasts are considered to be no more than means of feeding a baby and not sex organs. Breast-feeding is often done in public places such as bus stops and local markets. At one stage her lower garment fell down and immediately my lower jaw dropped! I could not believe what I saw and the immediate thought was if I tell anyone, no one would ever believe me. This person had breasts and male genitals (penis and a scrotum) as well. I was shocked, very shocked. I collected courage and approached her and spoke to her in Kiswahili (local language which I could and can speak fluently). I asked her if I could photograph her in nude. She was, understandably, furious. The response was emphatically 'NO'. I pleaded with her and explained the reasons why I wanted to photograph her in nude.

After her constant refusal I offered her my lunch pack, which fortunately I had not consumed. I also gave her all the money in my pocket, which, I still remember,

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was one schilling and fifty-five cents, which was my pocket money for the entire week. Long last she consented and I made this picture. I was just about 14 years old at the time and to be honest I was nervous and made at least six exposures at different settings to ensure that I get correctly exposed negatives, as there was no chance for a retake.



I came down the hill as fast as I could and straight into my darkroom to process the film. Bingo! I had perfectly focussed and exposed negatives. I could not wait for the film to dry and as soon as it was dry, it went into my enlarger and I printed a postcard size print.

Next morning I went to my local family doctor's surgery and waited outside until the nurse opened the front door. I managed to see the doctor and showed him the picture with a question - 'what is this?' He smiled and pulled out a medical textbook and explained me all about

'hermaphrodite' or 'intersex'. The doctor was impressed with my picture and he knew that I was interested in photography and I knew how to use my camera. He asked me if I would photograph couple of his patients with Tropical Ulcers on the lower legs. I, of course, jumped at the opportunity.

Next day I photographed his two patients very carefully. My studio was a stool under a big mango tree with a white sheet behind the leg as a background. My camera would not focus closer than 3.5 feet. I used a white cloth as a reflector, which was strategically held, in place by a nurse. I had to enlarge a small section of the negative but I still managed to get decent prints. Prints were delivered to the doctor the same day. About two or three months later he called me in and showed me an article he had written on Tropical Ulcers and published in The South African Medical Journal. At the end of the article, under acknowledgements, it read 'I would like to thank Afzal Ansary, the Medical Photographer for these photographs'.

This was a turning point in my life and I realised that this is what I want to do – medical photography. My father wanted me to be a doctor but I wanted to be a photographer. Well, we compromised and agreed on medical photography despite the fact that my father believed there was no profession such a medical photography. As I said earlier it was totally unheard of. Soon I was spending time in the local British Council Library reading all about medical photography courses available in the United Kingdom (UK).

On completion of my school education I went to the UK to study Medical Photography. The rest, as they, say 'is history'.

About the Author

Dr. Afzal Ansary, FBCA, has worked in medical and scientific imaging well over 50 years. In 2013 he was awarded the Fenton Medal and Honorary Life Membership of The Royal Photographic Society.

After working at Guy's Hospital Medical School, London in 1971 he established and headed the Department of Medical Illustration at the University of Zambia for 18 years. He also served as an Honorary Consultant to the National Council for Scientific Research, Zambia, and awarded Honorary Fellowships of both the British Institute of Professional Photographers and the Master Photographers Association.

He is an Accredited Senior Imaging Scientist (ASIS) and holds six Fellowships in Medical, Scientific, Biological Photography and Microscopy. He has an extensive list of presentations and published papers. He is the principal author of the book *A Colour Atlas of AIDS in the Tropics* for which he was awarded the RPS Medical Group Lancet Award in 1990.

Within the Royal Photographic Society he is a member of the Science Committee and Distinctions Advisory Board. He is also Chairman of the Imaging Science Qualifications Board and also Chairman of the Medical Group.

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