

Editorial

The Imager's Self-Image

The following conversation was overheard recently in an ophthalmic photography department.

Patient: "Are you a doctor?"

Ophthalmic Photographer: "Sorry, I'm just an ophthalmic photographer."

Patient: "I see. You're only a photographer."

Although the patient most probably intended no slight, the choice of words reflected the photographer's own poor self-image.

Why are some ophthalmic photographers so often self-effacing and apologetic about their careers? Does this derive from the belief that their work is trivial and unimportant, especially when compared with that of the ophthalmologists with whom they work? Is it because the profession of ophthalmic photography is difficult to define, since it encompasses so many skills and is tangentially related to so many others? Or does their poor self-image result from a lack of essential professional abilities?

Even though the value of ophthalmic photography to modern ophthalmic practice has often been stated, some recent developments have further increased its worth. Recognized as clinically valuable for two decades, fluorescein angiography has been confirmed by several multicenter national studies as requisite for the quantification of diabetic macular edema, peripheral ischemia and the localization of subretinal neovascular membranes prior to laser therapy. Similarly, specular photomicrography provides insights into corneal health and contributes to the surgeon's decision-making process. Selected wavelength photography of the nerve fiber layer and digital imaging of the optic nerve head are also proving to be valuable adjuncts to the subspecialties of glaucoma and neuro-ophthalmology. New federally funded studies, including the Herpetic Eye Disease Study (HEDS) and the Study of the Ocular Complications of AIDS (SOCA) use exacting photographic protocols to chart the natural history of ocular diseases and the effectiveness of new therapeutic regimens. Trivial and unimportant? On the contrary, in all of these applications, the services of skilled ophthalmic photographers are indispensable.

Some may regard professional ophthalmic photographers in the same way as ophthalmic technicians or other ancillary clinic personnel, because they must have a strong working knowledge of ophthalmology. However, ophthalmic photographers must also master the purely technical aspects of scientific photography to produce optimum results. They must often be artists as well as technicians, possessing an understanding of such artistic concepts as line, form, color, chiaroscuro and composition to imbue their photographs with aesthetic as well as scientific value.

One would similarly err by describing ophthalmic photography as merely a specialized branch of medical photography. While both disciplines are charged with the recording of appearances, ophthalmic photographers must also be intimately aware of ocular anatomy and the pathophysiology of disease processes—knowledge that enables them to search out and record minute or transient subjects. Although medical photographers and ophthalmic photographers may both be responsible for a variety of nonclinical photographic tasks, seldom is the generalist required to interact intensely with patients or to master patient management techniques which are so essential to successful ophthalmic photography.

In some ways ophthalmic photography is related to photojournalism, in that both disciplines require a natural curiosity and a wonderment at seeing new things. However, rather than "shooting from the hip," the ophthalmic photographer works in an extremely controlled and meticulous fashion, controlling every aspect of the camera, lighting, and subject position to produce photographs of maximum use.

As the rate of technological advancement in modern ophthalmology increases at a dizzying pace, so must the ophthalmic photographer continue to learn. If the photographer feels a lack of professional identity, that self-image deficit is easily remedied. A variety of published materials are accessible for this purpose, including the regular ophthalmic photography column in *Ophthalmology Times*, several excellent textbooks, and *The Journal of Ophthalmic Photography*. A wide selection of continuing education programs, sponsored by such groups as the Ophthalmic Photographers' Society (OPS), are offered in many locations nationally and even internationally.

In fact, the OPS scientific exhibit at the annual American Academy of Ophthalmology meeting and *The Journal of Ophthalmic Photography* provide members with direct access to venues for professional recognition. The exhibit provides a showplace for the very finest ophthalmic images. Even though the competition is severe, hundreds of entries are evaluated each year. The relatively few photographs displayed bring their creators a tremendous feeling of pride.

The Journal of Ophthalmic Photography likewise provides ophthalmic photographers with a valuable opportunity to gain professional recognition. It is the sole professional publication [in English] dedicated exclusively to ophthalmic imaging technology. Its production values are superb, it provides clinical and research workers around the world with valuable information, and it too brings its authors a wonderful feeling of professional accomplishment.

Despite these numerous resources and opportunities, many photographers lack sufficient motivation to take advantage of them. Although apathy may be a major reason for an ophthalmic photographer to lack essential technical information, it may also provide an insurmountable obstacle for professional advancement. The first step in overcoming apathy is to simply "get involved." With relatively little effort, the technical question may be answered, a great photograph may win an award and public acclaim or a new photographic technique may be published in a peer-reviewed journal.

"Just an ophthalmic photographer?" When describing a person with keen powers of observation, solid technical skills combined with artistic sensitivity, an inquiring mind, and an active and engaged member of the ophthalmic health care team, "ophthalmic photographer" becomes high praise indeed.

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