

From Forensic Photography to Medical Photography

Interview with Kevin Jacob, Senior Medical Photographer at Illingworth Research Group



Tell me about your background

I originally worked as an electrical engineering apprentice but decided to go to university and study Computer Science. After one year, I decided it wasn't for me and, photography being a hobby, I commenced an HND qualification in Photographic Technology. Upon completion of the HND, I transferred to the BA degree course in Photography and completed my degree.

After finishing my degree, I set up as a commercial photographer shooting weddings and promotional images.

How did you get into Forensic Photography?

After a couple of years of wedding photography, I saw an advert for a job in London working as a Forensic photographer for the Metropolitan police. Although I was living in a lovely, leafy suburban area in Cheshire, (UK) I was excited about the challenge and the fact that forensics was very different from what I was doing. I think the fact that I had the technical background in photography helped me to get the role. They wanted someone with a degree in photography and technical experience.

Armed with some examples of my work at the interview, including close-up photographs of a gun with fingerprints on it - my Father is a gunsmith. I also had some photos of injuries and accident scenes from working with a solicitor who dealt with personal injury claims.



Tell me about the early days in Forensics.

I moved to London and lived in the Docklands area covering the North East quadrant of London, roughly from Zone 1 to the M25. What struck me was the close teamwork and highly organised way in which the crime scene was handled and processed. It certainly beat the chaos of chasing Brides and Grooms around and trying to organise wedding guests into some sort of order for photos!

I struggled watching post-mortem examinations initially but had to get used to it as it was clearly necessary for my role that I didn't collapse whilst attending.

After a few weeks of photography and videography training at the Hendon police training college in London, I learnt about specialist lighting and the various processes employed within the main police imaging division. I then went out on the road and shadowed an experienced Forensic Photographer.

What was your first Forensic Photography job?

It was a fatal accident on a main dual carriageway into London during the rush hour. I had to talk to the accident investigators on scene and ask for traffic to be stopped so that I could capture all the required photographs from various angles - rather quickly. When photographing at a crime scene, you are only focused on the camera settings and visually telling a story. The first job I ever did on my own with the police was a suspicious death. The body had been in a river for a few days and was not in a good state. I won't go into detail, but the team were supportive and I just focussed on the job in hand without mentally processing the actual scene content.

I felt important as I flashed my badge in my unmarked van to get the police to raise the cordon and let me into the crime scene area.

What made you move into Medical Photography?

It wasn't the gore of the crime scenes I had to photograph, I treated these as images, like a grouping of pixels - which is essentially what any image is. Rather I had a scary situation after photographing a very angry drug gang following a raid on their premises. Through a lack of communication, I was left with the gang and thousands of pounds worth of equipment before the realisation that I was very vulnerable as the officers pulled away. After two and a half years on the job, I was engaged and decided that I didn't want to raise children in central London being exposed to the job I was doing. One of my colleagues almost died of meningitis following exposure at a crime scene. That combination of factors made my mind up to leave the world of Forensic photography.

I moved back to leafy Cheshire and came across a Biotech company called Renovo that was a spin off from Manchester University in the UK. I was pleased to move into a different industry and safer role, which was more in line with my plan to bring up children.

What differences are there between Medical and Forensic Photography?

Honestly, an image is an image. Whether it is a toenail fungus image or a blood-stained knife, the focus is on getting the clearest possible image you can, so from that point of view there is very little difference. However, looking back I am glad to be out of the potentially dangerous situations. What is also quite similar is the fact that no day is the same. Now, I can be training investigators and site teams at an investigator meeting, setting up equipment ready for sites or nurses, analysing images or consulting on a protocol. I still love actually taking photographs and shooting training videos for Sponsors.

After 5 years working in Medical Photography, I took a Clinical Photography qualification approved by the Institute of Medical Illustrators. This is the qualification which is recognised in this field and with the National Health Service. It is difficult to get into as you need to have a job and be working in the Medical Photography field before you can get onto this course.

What now?

After 10 years at Renovo, Illingworth took over much of the photography team and I have been working with Illingworth for the last 9 years.

We provide full-service capability from protocol review, equipment selection, training, image QC, analysis and reporting. We are also working with videography and 3D. Our mobile research nursing service means that we can support photography and visits within the home or workplace. For example, we are currently supporting a trial in the rare dermatological condition Epidermolysis bullosa that results in easy blistering of the skin and mucous membranes. Our nurses take the photos of the blisters at home and perform the nursing elements of the visits.

Technological advances in imaging are happening all the time. I am keen to explore the use of more advanced imaging devices and transfer technology for patients in trials which include imaging elements.

In summary

Although the world of Forensic Photography appears exciting and at times gruesome, the taking of images in the world of clinical trials has the same discipline and attention to detail. It is a little more sedate though and perhaps works better for me as a husband and father of three children!

