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REFLECTING IDENTITIES: USING PORTRAITURE WITH PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM LIFE THREATENING ILLNESSESSusan Carr ¹*Prospect Hospice, Swindon, UK;* ²*Loughborough University, Leicestershire, UK*

10.1136/bmjspcare-2011-000105.94

“I look in the mirror and I say, ‘who’s that?’ I don’t really know who I am anymore! I have lost the person I thought I was.” Patient, Prospect Hospice.

Arguably life threatening or chronic illness is not just an attack on the body, it is an attack on the embodied self, and identity, shattering the means by which a person experiences the world, and by which they also are experienced, contributing to a person’s sense of powerlessness and ‘loss of self’ (Charmaz, 1983). Therefore negatively affecting a person’s ability to continue with their pre-illness activities, relationships and future plans and contributing to their ‘total pain’.

This paper will present case studies, drawn from the author’s current PhD research, looking at how working collaboratively with an artist to co-design a portrait of themselves can help people suffering from life threatening or chronic illnesses to increase their self knowledge, build new identities and improve their ‘individual creative capacity’, to adapt to illness, therefore enabling the development of a more coherent sense of self and identity.

When attempting to understand the complex emotions and feelings contained within experiences of illness and loss of self, the use of portraiture as identity work, provides an intervention within which discursive knowledge and non-discursive knowledge can be reintegrated into a more coherent whole. Portraits often capture the ‘essence’ or subjectivity of a person; the trace of a human presence left behind, and can enable people feeling detached from their body after invasive treatment, to recover a sense of autonomy over the bodily image they portray. This intervention also offers ‘time,’ for the building of a collaborative relationship, at a time when relationship is hard to sustain, acknowledging that identity is built and sustained in relationship with others.