

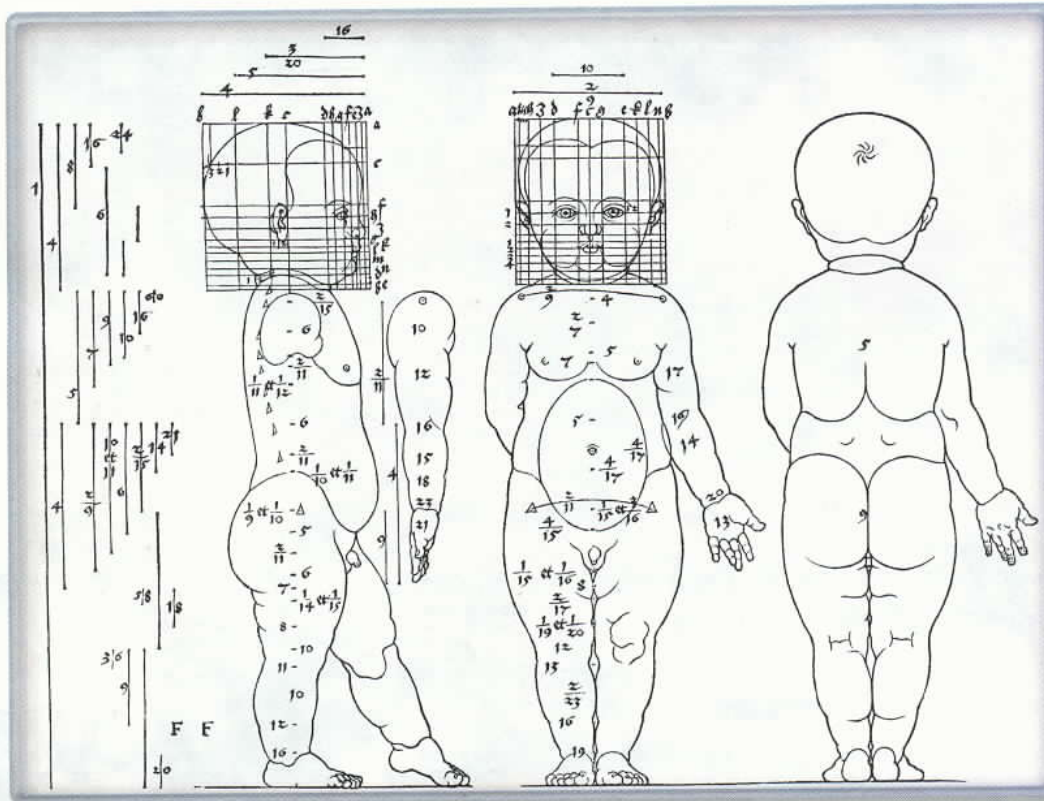
ARCHIVES

OF

PEDIATRICS & ADOLESCENT MEDICINE

WWW.ARCHPEDIATRICS.COM

AUGUST 2003



Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), *The Proportions of an Infant* (ca 1528). See page 718.

OBESITY AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

COMPLETE TABLE OF CONTENTS ON PAGE 711

Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)

The Proportions of an Infant (1528)

PAINTERS AND PEDIATRICIANS share a professional interest in the sizes and shapes of children's bodies. The drawings on this month's cover are from *Four Books of Human Proportions* by German artist Albrecht Dürer.¹ In effect, they are Dürer's blueprints for an ideal child.

Dürer defined the child's overall height as 1 unit so that the image could easily be rescaled to any size. Each number on the drawing indicates a body dimension as a fraction of that unit. On the lateral view of the arm, for example, the width at the shoulder is one tenth of the child's total height, whereas at the elbow it is one sixteenth and at the wrist, one twenty-third.

Dürer's interest in "aesthetic anthropometry"^{2(p264)} was kindled around 1500 when the Italian artist Jacopo de' Barbari allowed Dürer a glimpse into his private sketchbook. Various human figures had been drawn according to numerical rules relating the sizes of different body parts to one another. Tantalized by the idea that such rules might exist, Dürer asked for the formulas, but de' Barbari considered them trade secrets and declined to share them. Dürer began his own research to develop general rules for portraying beautiful human figures.

The project continued for 28 years until Dürer's death. He ran into several difficulties. At first he was guided by the idea that "the perfection of form and beauty is contained in the sum of all men."^{3(p250)} He reasoned that if Adam and Eve were perfect, having been created directly by God, then the ideal proportions could be recovered by averaging the characteristics of all of their descendants. In time, he obtained measurements for 200 to 300 people. The results were not satisfying. Even if the theory had merit, most of Adam and Eve's many descendants were inaccessible to Dürer, and those available to him for study hardly constituted a random sample of all humankind. To our modern minds, it is probably clearer that such statistical norms do not capture beauty any more than they define optimal health; if they did, today's "perfect" child would be getting plumper every year as the prevalence of obesity increases.

Dürer also tried selecting the eyes of one person, the nose of another, the forehead of another, and so on to create a composite figure with only the most beautiful features. According to legend, the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis used this method to paint an image of Helen of Troy, combining the features of the 5 most beautiful women in his city. However, Dürer came to recognize the inherent circularity of the method—that it depended on the artist's subjective choice of which features to combine. In the end, he abandoned the goal of finding a single formula for an ideal human figure and instead created drawings for 26 different adult body types as a teaching aid for future artists. He left only this single set for an infant.

Although the *Four Books of Human Proportions* were popular among art students in the 16th century, times and tastes had already begun to change. Eventually artists no longer felt bound by fixed rules or anthropometric data when drawing the human body. Some pursued their artistic aims by deliberately distorting nature—Hieronymus Bosch or Alberto Giacometti, for example—whereas others went still further and rearranged body parts at will, including Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso.

Dürer's graphic works still evoke wonder for their remarkable detail and representational accuracy. After his long quest for a way to describe the ideal human figure, he concluded, "What beauty is, I do not know. . . ."^{3(p179)} When it comes to children, every mother knows.

Thomas D. Koepsell, MD, MPH
Seattle, Wash

REFERENCES

1. Dürer A. *Vier Bücher von Menschlicher Proportion*. London, England: GM Wagner; 1970.
2. Panofsky E. *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 1955.
3. Dürer A. *The Writings of Albrecht Dürer*. Conway WM, trans-ed. New York, NY: Philosophical Library; 1958.