Forty-eight years of progress in premature baby care

Talking to myself about advances in premature baby care since Jacqueline Kennedy’s premature son, Patrick, was born on August 7, 1963 and died 40 hours later:

I: Do you remember how much Patrick weighed at birth?
Me: Four pounds, 10 ounces.

I: By today’s standards, that’s a good-sized preemie to have die, isn’t it?
Me: True, bro. True.

I: If Patrick were born today, would he survive?
Me: It depends.

I: What kind of answer is that?
Me: Whoa bro, calm down.

I: Would he survive or not?
Me: Look. I’ve already said, it depends. Mrs. Kennedy’s first pregnancy ended with a miscarriage. After that, she gave birth to a stillborn girl, Arabella, while vacationing in Hyannis Port. No one knew why Arabella died, and an autopsy wasn’t done. Today, it would be unthinkable not to do an autopsy on a stillborn baby who has died for no obvious reason. After that, Mrs. Kennedy’s future pregnancies should have been considered high risk. Fortunately, her third pregnancy went relatively well, and she gave birth to Caroline at Cornell Medical Center in New York City. Her fourth pregnancy produced John Jr., who was born a few weeks early at the Georgetown Medical Center in Washington, D.C.. He stayed in an incubator for several days.
Then we have Mrs. Kennedy vacationing again toward the end of her fifth pregnancy instead of staying close to home and a hospital that offered the best of care. So when she feels a sharp abdominal pain and starts bleeding five and a half weeks before she’s due, she’s miles away from the nearest hospital, which turns out to be the base hospital at Otis Air Force Base in Massachusetts. Now, do you see why I said, it depends?

I: My apologies, bro. A premature baby's survival does depend on a lot more than its birth weight.

Me: Exactly. And in 1963, when Patrick was born, care for sick preemies was not regionalized like it is today. There was no organized transport service for sick babies. There were no neonatologists who specialized in newborn intensive care. They did not appreciate how important it was to keep Patrick warm and that time was of the essence. He was born by emergency cesarean section at the base hospital, placed in an incubator, and then they waited for his father, the most powerful man in the world, to arrive by plane. And while they waited, Patrick’s condition got worse. And then when his father finally arrived, he wheeled the baby into his wife’s room and placed the baby in her arms. Of course, the baby was further cold-stressed and deprived of oxygen with all that handling. We call it the “VIP Syndrome.”

I: VIP Syndrome?

Me: Very important people – because of the demands they make - often get the worst care.

I: You make it sound awful.

Me: Well, the care sick babies got back then, in many instances, was awful compared to the care Patrick would get today. Today, a premature baby born in a community hospital by emergency cesarean section has a doctor there for the delivery, the baby is stabilized, his breathing problem recognized, and he is either whisked away to the hospital’s neonatal intensive care unit or a transport team from the regional center is called to take him by
ambulance to the center. Mom would still get the chance to see and touch her baby – but not hold him in her arms - and off they would go.

By the time Patrick was transported to Boston Children’s Hospital, an hour and a half away, he was critically ill. But President Kennedy downplayed how sick Patrick was to his wife, not wanting to upset her any more than she already was. But even at Boston Children’s, respirators for critically ill newborns hadn’t been invented yet. So they placed Patrick in a hyperbaric chamber (a full-sized room where they could deliver oxygen at greater than atmospheric pressure) in a last ditch effort to save the President’s son, and it didn’t work. Today, if Patrick’s care was handled properly from the moment of birth, his chances would be greater than 95 percent for a healthy survival.

I: So they didn’t have respirator care for preemies back then, right?
Me: Right.

I: And they really didn’t understand what caused hyaline membrane disease, his breathing problem, back then either.
Me: Right again.

I: But now we do?
Me: Not only do we understand what causes hyaline membrane disease, obstetricians can even prevent or modify it by treating a pregnant woman with steroids before she gives birth to even a two-pound baby.

I: One more question, if I may.
Me: Shoot.

I: What happened after Patrick died?
Me: Cardinal Cushing, the family’s spiritual advisor and close friend, insisted on holding a funeral mass in Boston and burying Patrick right away.
I: Was Patrick’s mother involved?
Me: No. Mrs. Kennedy was recovering from her cesarean delivery and never got to see him again.

I: What do you think of that?
Me: We wouldn’t do it that way today, either. We would offer to transport Patrick’s body back to the hospital of birth and give his mom the opportunity to see, touch, and hold her newly deceased baby for as long as she wished. Then the family could also have the funeral mass at the birth hospital, following a plan devised by the baby’s mom and dad.

I: That sounds wonderful!
Me: Amen.

A further thought: Fifteen weeks after Patrick’s death, his father was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas, Texas.