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Great Moments in Medicine

Preemie Road Shows

The neonatal incubator gained acceptance through public exhibitions.

By Tonse N. K. Raju, MD

In the early 1870s, the French government established a Commission on Depopulation to attempt to increase the rates of childbearing and infant survival. This led to the first modern, organized efforts toward maternity and infant care.

In 1878, Stéphane Tarnier (1828–97), a renowned Parisian obstetrician, saw an incubator devised by zookeeper Odile Martin for hatching poultry. Tarnier asked Martin to create a similar device for human infants. The result was the *couveuse*, an insulated box with two chambers. The lower chamber was filled with water heated by an oil lamp, which in turn warmed the air in the upper chamber, where the infant was kept.

The *couveuse* made its debut at the Paris Maternity Hospital in 1881. Tarnier's colleague, Pierre Budin (1846–1907), established the first special unit for premature infants at the same hospital in 1893.

To make the French technology popular abroad, Budin sent six incubators with his assistant, Martin Couney (1860–1950), to the 1896 Berlin Exposition. Couney added drama and realism to the exhibit by bringing in six premature infants from a local maternity unit. It was considered an acceptable risk because the babies' chances of survival were so poor anyway.

Couney called the show *Kinderbrutanstalt*, or "child hatchery." It was wildly successful. At one German mark per visit, the child hatchery outdrew the Congo Village, skyrides, and Tyrolian Yodellers. Fortunately for Budin and Couney, all six infants survived.

Spurred by the success in Berlin, Couney was invited to continue such displays and took incubators to Great Britain's 1897 Victorian Era Exhibition. However, because no self-respecting Londoner would allow his premature infant to be placed inside a *French* incubator, Couney asked Budin to provide French babies. Premature infants were transported across the English Channel in wash baskets warmed with hot-water bottles.

Within eight months, an incubator craze was in full swing. An editorial in the *Lancet* decried copycat exhibitions organized by "all sorts of persons, who had no knowledge of the intricate scientific problem involved." In those displays, the incubated infants were exposed to "the dust of bicycle racing, the smoking of the men, and the exhalations from the crowd," as well as "the obnoxious odor that arises from cages in which . . . animals are incarcerated." The indignant *Lancet* editors asked: "Is it in keeping with the dignity of science that incubators and living babies should be exhibited amidst the aunt-sallies, the

merry-go-rounds, the five-legged mule, the wild animals, the clowns, penny peep-shows, and amidst the glare and noise of a vulgar fair?”

In 1898, Couney sailed to North America and organized the first U.S. incubator show at the Omaha Trans-Mississippi Exposition. He continued to mount premature baby shows for the next 40 years, taking incubators to state, regional, and international fairs and science expositions throughout the U.S. He established a permanent exhibit on New York’s Coney Island.

The last of the baby shows was held at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair. Couney’s exhibit on Coney Island closed soon after. All told, about 80,000 “Couney babies” were raised in exhibitions in the U.S.

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