Martin Couney and Incubator Exhibits from 1896 to 1943

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During the late 1800s and early 1900s, physician Martin Couney held incubator exhibits to demonstrate the efficacy of infant incubators throughout the US and Europe. At his exhibits, Couney demonstrated that isolating premature infants in an incubator ward could significantly decrease premature infant mortality and increased the use of incubators in the US.

Couney studied medicine in Berlin and Leipzig, Germany, before moving to work under Pierre Budin at the Paris Maternité Hospital in Paris, France. Budin was an obstetrician who established infant care facilities throughout hospitals in Paris. Budin also worked with Etienne Stephane Tarnier, who developed one of the first infant warming devices. In 1896, Budin sent Couney to the Berlin Exposition in Berlin, Germany, to show a new incubator model and promote its use throughout Europe.

At the Exposition in Berlin, Couney held an exhibit called the Kinderbrutanstalt (child hatchery) to demonstrate the effectiveness of infant incubators. Upon arriving in Berlin, Couney obtained six premature infants from the director of the Charité hospital, Rudolph Virchow. All six infants were expected to die. Couney kept all six infants in incubators in a pavilion at the Exposition. Over a hundred thousand visitors paid to the see the infants. All six infants survived for the two months of the Exposition.


In 1898, Couney coordinated his first show in the US, at the 1898 Trans-Mississippi and International Exhibition in Omaha, Nebraska. The rural location did not attract large crowds and Couney returned to Europe in 1900 to host an exhibit at the Exposition Universelle in Paris.

Couney returned in 1901 for the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. At the Pan-American Exposition, Couney housed infants in a building specially built for his exhibit in the amusement section of the exposition, rather than science section. The Pan-American was a large fair and Couney’s show attracted media attention from public press and medical press alike.

Articles appeared in Pediatrics, Scientific American, and Cosmopolitan about Couney’s show in Buffalo. Following the Exposition, the Children’s Hospital of Buffalo bought several infant incubators.

In 1903, Couney permanently immigrated to the United States and a year later opened a permanent exhibit of infant incubators at Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York. Couney held an exhibit in Luna Park from 1904 until 1943, and also held a short exhibit in Coney Island’s other amusement part, Dreamland.

Despite the exhibit’s location in an amusement park Couney treated premature infants of parents who could not afford proper medical care and did not charge for care. The names of the infants were kept anonymous. The public who came to see Couney’s exhibit on Coney Island paid an admission fee of 25 cents. Couney employed five wet-nurses to feed the infants and several other medically trained technicians, including his daughter, who was a nurse. Couney required the wet-nurses to keep a strict diet because of their role in treatment of premature infants.

Couney continued his display at Luna Park until 1943, claiming he would not retire until city hospitals opened up proper incubator wards. He took his infant incubator exhibit around the country to other amusement parks and fairs, including the 1915 Panama Pacific International Expo in San Francisco, California, the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, and the 1939 New York World’s Fair in New York City, New York.

Couney treated more than 8,000 premature infants, over 6,500 of whom lived. Luna Park closed in 1943 after the popularity and revenue of exhibits waned. Couney retired shortly after closing the exhibit.

Sources
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