Martin Couney's Story Revisited

[Letter to the Editor]

The AAP Perinatal Section Ad Hoc Committee on Perinatal History

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"Writing history is like trying to nail jelly to the wall."

-- Robin Winks

*To the Editor.*

Seventeen years ago, one of us (W.A.S.) [1] reported the odd story of Martin Couney, the "incubator doctor," who exhibited premature infants in side shows for 50 years beginning in 1896 at the "Berliner Gewerbe Ausstellung," a trade fair. Couney claimed that Pierre Budin of Paris, the famous pioneer in premature infant care, sent him (Couney) to the Berlin exposition to exhibit a newly modified convection-ventilated incubator. A caveat was noted in the 1979 article in *Pediatrics*: "... the search has taken 28 years (so far), and some loose ends remain." Sure enough, a short time after publication, Couney's account began to unravel. Felix Marx, a reader in Bonn, Germany, saw the article and wrote to call attention to a relevant piece in a popular British magazine published in 1896. [2] The profusely illustrated magazine article reported that Alexandre Lion of Nice invented a forced-air ventilated incubator in 1891, and exhibited premature infants to the public in "infant charities" in his city and in Paris, Bordeaux, Marseilles, and Lyons. The British story discredited Couney's claim of priority in the bizarre activity; and this "adjustment" to the story was duly reported to the readers of *Pediatrics* in a letter to the editor. [3]

Now additional clouds of doubt have been cast over the story. Leonore Ballowitz of Berlin, shortly before her untimely death in 1994, searched through the public archives in her city. She found the name of Lion, but was unable to find any mention of Couney.
Julia Whitefield, MD, PhD, from Frankfurt, now living in Arvada, CO, translated a paragraph from the "Official Exhibition News" of 1896.

"The Children's Incubation Institute continues to arouse lively interest amongst the visitors to the trade exhibition and has spurned the invitation to become a permanent institution in Berlin, we were told. A committee, which is in the process of being formed, includes some renowned professors, amongst them one of the most influential gynecologists in Berlin, and has taken it upon itself to find the necessary financial means to found such an infants' asylum. It will be modeled after the Children's Incubation Center at the exhibition. It will house mainly weak and prematurely born children in the incubator constructed by Mr. Lion. Mr. Lion announced to the committee that he will donate the necessary incubators for this asylum. A brochure readily available for distribution since yesterday afternoon contains interesting data regarding the stigmata of prematurely born children and an exact description of Mr. Lion's incubator and its use. In addition, the pamphlet includes evaluation by Privy Counselor Professor Gusserow, medical director of the University Women's Clinic, and by Professor Rudolph Virchow. Both scholars endorse the value of Lion's incubator through their professional opinions especially composed for this brochure, as does the renowned Berlin neurologist Professor Albert Eulenburg, who during a visit to the French Riviera, came across the 'maternite Lion' in Nice."

In carrying out the research for his new book *The Machine in the Nursery*, [4] one of us (J.P.B.) found that the incubators "... were those of Alexandre Lion, whose business provided the financial backing for the Berlin exhibit. Contemporary reports of Berlin mention only Lion, suggesting that Couney was likely working under his (Lion's) auspices." Additionally, Baker found "no evidence that Budin... cooperated or corresponded with Couney after 1897." Couney's claim of an alliance with Budin, Baker writes (politely), "must be qualified."

Another of us (L.J.B.) has spread the news about this "revision in the history of the incubator" in presentations and in the AAP's *Perinatal Section News*. [5] We write this letter to your readers in the hope that others will come forth with additional items of information about this curious episode in the history of newborn medicine.

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