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Baby Incubator Exhibit at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo

As with other attractions at a fair, a "barker" tried to entice people into the "premie" exhibit located in a "neat and artistic" brick building. However, while this "exhibit" took its place among the other "shows" on the Exposition midway, the scientific and educational potential was not overlooked. The following quote appeared in the August 1901 *Buffalo Medical Journal* under the column "Pan-American Notes:"

"The infant incubator at the junction of the Midway and the Mall has a constant stream of people going in and out. There are now 18 babies prematurely born in the incubators and the scientific rearing of these little human beings hanging between life and death by the slenderest thread, is most interesting not alone to scientists, but to the many mothers who go to the exposition. The incubator is in charge of physicians and the babies are cared for by nurses trained for this work alone. One can neglect seeing any other place on the grounds rather than this. It is not alone interesting; it is popularly instructive."¹

The "barker" at the Buffalo Pan-Am enticed customers by telling them this exhibit provided him to mothers and females for the successful rearing of weakly infants. An article from the 1901 edition of *Pediatrics* stated that the Lion incubators used at this exhibition were made of metal and glass, which allowed for quick and easy cleaning and sterilization.²



The Infant Incubator Building with "a constant stream of people going in and out."



Each infant was swaddled; a card above each incubator recorded the occupant's initials, date of birth, date of admission to the incubator and other details. The heat in the incubator varied plus or minus 2 degrees Fahrenheit. Fresh outdoor air for the incubator was filtered and warmed before reaching the infant. The babies were fed and cleaned every 2 hours, whether it was day or night. It was claimed in an article from *Scientific American*, August 3, 1901 that incubators saved 85 percent of the "premies and weaklings."³

In another [article](#) from *Cosmopolitan*, Arth Brisbane compared the baby incubators to wonders of Niagara Falls.⁴



Incubator Beginnings

The first attempt to construct an infant incubator on scientific principles was made in France in 1878. Although incubators had been patented in Paris by the early 1890s, U.S. physician Edward Brown, M.D., having no guidelines or descriptive plans, devised an incubator of his own to save

premature infant born in 1891.⁵



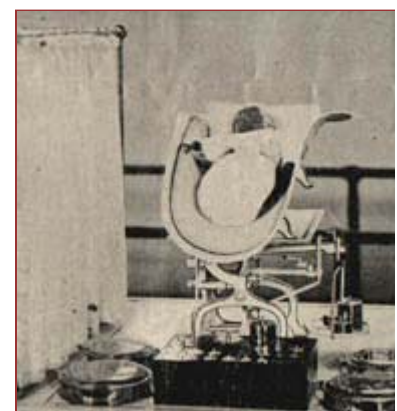
Incubator Exhibit in the News

The incubator exhibit received serious attention from *Scientific American*,⁶ which called it a model nursery. The baby incubator exhibit was in the news for other reasons as well. On July 20, 1901, the *Buffalo News* reported that a baby had been prematurely born to Apache Indian Princess Ikishupaw and Chief Many Tales. Dr. Couney was called to the Indian Pavilion and had the infant placed in an exhibit incubator. The *News* reported that at 2 pounds, 2 ounces, it was the smallest baby ever born. On November 7, 1901, *The New York Times* reported a different type of incident regarding the Baby Incubator Exhibit. According to the article, Couney and his partner did not pay the proceeds agreed upon to exhibit infant incubators at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. A judge had ordered them to pay their share which came to \$31,250 and to also pay \$75,000 in damages for repudiating a similar agreement for the division of the gross receipts of the incubator show at the coming St. Louis Exposition.



After-Effects of the Baby Incubator Exhibit

The Children's Hospital of Buffalo purchased the Lion incubators after the exposition ended. Afterwards, Couney went on to have a summer baby incubator exhibit for the next forty years at Coney Island. Couney felt parents did not appreciate the work he was doing for their premature and weak infants. When it was time to send a healthy infant home, it was difficult to convince the parents to take their infant. A pediatrician named Dr. Zahorsky, who oversaw an infant incubator exhibit, did note the effect of hospitalization on both the infant and the parents. We now know that it is not in the baby's best interest to be separated from its parents; neither is it in the parents' best interest.





References

1. More articles from the Buffalo Medical Journal can be found on the Doing the Pan web site at <http://panam1901.bfn.org/medical/medicalarticles.html>.
2. "Exhibit of Infant Incubators at the Pan-American Exhibition." *Pediatrics* v. 12 (1901) pp.414-419. Reproduced on website *Neonatology on the Web* at <http://www.neonatology.org/classics/panam.html>. Last accessed June 28, 2002
3. "Baby Incubators at the Pan-American Exposition." *Scientific American*, (August 3, 1901) . Reproduced on the website *Neonatology on the Web* at <http://www.neonatology.org/classics/sciam.html>. Last accessed June 28, 2002.
- 4 . Arthur Brisbane. "The Incubator Baby and Niagara Falls." *Cosmopolitan*, vol. 31, no. 5 (September 1901), pp. 509-510.
5. Edward J. Brown, M.D. "A New Baby Incubator." *Medical Record* v.41 (April 16, 1892) pp. 446-447. Reproduced on the website *Neonatology on the Web* at <http://www.neonatology.org/classics/brown.html>. Last accessed June 28, 2002.
6. "Baby Incubators at the Pan-American Exposition." Last accessed June 28, 2002.

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