Coney Island Nurses

Three nurses from the Coney Island exhibit, holding six premature infants having an average weight of 2 pounds. With permission from neonatology.net https://neonatology.net/glry/coneyislandnurses.html

The coney island nurses cared for premature infants between the years of 1903 and 1943. These nurses helped pioneer the use of incubation for premature babies in the United States. We acknowledge the nurses’ devotion to these tiny lives, and the role that they played in the development of neonatal care. Below we highlight three of these outstanding nurses.

ANNABELLE MAYE SEGNER COUNEY

Annabelle, who preferred to use her middle name Maye, most likely received her nurse's training at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago. When Martin Couney (Michael Cohen) was looking for nurses to staff the incubator exhibit he planned for the Buffalo Exhibition in 1901, Maye was recommended to him. She was hired for that exhibition and continued to be with him for the remainder of her life. She married Martin in 1903. Maye was known for her strict insistence on cleanliness, strict protocols for the infants to include bathing, feeding and time being held and cuddled. She was also the financial manager of all of Martin Couney’s incubator exhibits. Martin and Maye had one child, a preterm daughter Hildegarde, who went on to become the third nurse leader for the incubator exhibits. Maye died during brain surgery in 1936.
AMELIA LOUISE RECHT

Less is known about Amelia Louise Recht, RN. She came from the Paris (France) Maternity Hospital where Dr. Etienne Tarnier and his intern, Pierre Budin, were pioneers in incubator use. Louise was known as the leading nurse specialist in premature care in all of Europe. Martin Couney had secured the contract for an incubator exhibit at the Diamond Jubilee celebration for Queen Victoria’s 60-year reign. Couney wanted to place live infants in the incubators, feeling it would draw more people into the exhibit. After being turned down by Empress Augusta Victoria for babies from the Berlin Charity Hospital, he turned to France. There he was able to secure 6 infants and the nurse, Louise Recht. Together they brought the babies to London where all 6 survived and were discharged home from the fair. Louise stayed on with Couney and came to America. Louise taught Maye the method of spoon-feeding infants through the nose and all the care of the preterm infants. She and Maye were the head nurses for the babies. She supervised the nurses and wet nurses who staffed the incubator exhibits while ruling the nursery with an iron hand. Louise was known by the doctors who attended the babies as the one who knew more about preterm infants than anyone and no one dared write an order she had not previously approved. Louise was a close friend who often lived with the Coneyes; Hildegard called her Aunt Louise. Louise, who retired with the final closing of the Coney Island Incubator exhibit in 1943, died in 1951.

HILDEGARD FRANCES COUNEY

Hildegard, daughter of Martin and Maye Couney, was born in 1907, 6 weeks early and weighing 3 pounds. Martin immediately phoned a friend with a large automobile to go to Coney Island and retrieve an incubator out of storage and bring it to him. He plunged his tiny daughter into ice water several times to get her breathing, then wrapped her in blankets until the incubator arrived. Hildegard was in the incubator, including at the exhibit, for 3 months. After she completed nurse’s training, she worked full time with the infants in the incubators. When her parents were away at State exhibitions and World Fairs, Hildegard ran the unit at Atlantic City. She continued to work as a nurse after the exhibits closed but suffered from poor health. She died in 1956 at the age of 49.