

3rd International Conference

PEDIATRICS & PEDIATRIC HEALTHCARE

April 27-28, 2023 | Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Received Date: 14-03-2023 | Accepted date: 16-03-2023 | Published date: 15-05-2023

Lo and behold: Origins and effects of early incubator shows

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Not the American ‘showman’ Martin Couney, but the French inventor Alexandre Lion laid in 1890 the foundation for infant incubators with living children featuring as a scientific attraction in international and world exhibitions or busy streets in cities. He combined Philanthropism, Patriotism and compassion into a commercial undertaking that saved lives. Thus, Lion and his imitators (like Couney) opened a non-clinical route for the use of infant incubators. This new course had an important impact on the clinical route that had started 10 years earlier in France with the obstetrician Étienne Stéphane Tarnier.

In this presentation, I would like to explore the origins of this non-clinical route, for this has received little attention so far. Like Tarnier, Lion’s story begins with an egg incubator, but his was more technically advanced, as was his infant version. Lion’s experiences with his first baby in May 1890 had a profound influence on his modus operandi. Shortly before entering the world of exhibitions, he developed a new, elegant version of his incubator that made him steal the show on International Exhibitions in Lyon (1894), Amsterdam (1895) and Berlin (1896). I will look in some detail how these three shows were set up and what were the results.

Although not everybody was as enthusiastic as Lion hoped or even expected, his shows did influence in the clinical world and his institutions and ‘shows’ served as living examples that were followed in Europe and elsewhere. One of these so-called spin-offs delivered us the so far only known Lion incubators to have survived till this day.

Recent publications

1. Gras T, Alexandre Lion: The Forgotten Inventor of Incubator Shows. In: Pediatrics 2022 (September 1; 150(3): e2021054576.

Biography

Thijs Gras (born 1962) completed his MA in medieval history in 1988, then changed his career into Nursing and now works for almost 30 years as a Specialized Ambulance Nurse in Amsterdam. He is co-editor of the National Dutch Ambulance Magazine and wrote about 20 books and many more articles about the history, practice and organization of ambulance care in The Netherlands and elsewhere. He recently took up research in the field of early incubator history, where he unearthed new information using hitherto unused sources. This led to a publication in Pediatrics in 2022.

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