

Premature Infant Care in the Early 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

The complex early history of infant incubators provides insight into challenges faced by medical professionals as they promoted care for premature infants in the early 20th century. Despite their absence from the narrative to date, nurses played vital roles in the development of neonatal care. Working in many different settings, from incubator-baby shows to the first hospital unit designed specifically for premature infants, nurses administered quality care and promoted advanced treatment for these newborns.

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Similar to many other emerging medical specialties of the time, the trajectory of neonatal care was shaped by the social, political, and economic forces in the early 20th century. The complex historical path toward widespread acceptance of the mechanical incubator, which paralleled the recognition of the care of premature infants as a legitimate medical endeavor, illustrates how time and place can affect the success of a new technology as much as its technical proficiency. Although it was introduced in the United States as early as 1898, the incubator did not become an integral part of the care of premature infants until the 1940s, presumably as a result of competing social influences. New technological innovations engendered grand optimism about the future of science and medicine, and Progressive Era public health reforms elevated social perceptions of the importance of protecting children. In contrast, however, the dark contempt produced by eugenics and Social Darwinism and limited economic resources in hospitals challenged organized attempts to popularize premature infant care. Previous researchers who studied the history of neonatology focused mostly on these sociocultural forces to explain the nonlinear trajectory of incubator acceptance, highlighting the influence of the medical profession (Baker, 1996, 2000; Cone, 1985; Desmond, 1998; Reedy, 2003a;

Silverman, 1979). A substantial gap in the literature exists regarding the contribution of nurses in the development of neonatal care. In this article, we review the evolution of neonatology and describe the roles of nurses in the provision of direct care to premature infants in a variety of settings during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Historical Attitudes and Approaches to Premature Infants

For much of human history, infants were regarded only for their potential to become productive members of society. Premature, congenitally debilitated, and sickly infants, referred to as *weaklings*, were often exposed to death because they held no social value (Cone, 1985). It was not until around 1870 that infants born before term gestation were even differentiated, and the phrase *premature infant* became part of the English vernacular (Reedy, 2003a).

The idea that some infant mortality was acceptable persisted well into the 20th century, particularly in the United States. As neonatologist William A. Silverman, noted,

The toll of life has always been disproportionately high among the smallest, most enfeebled offspring. [that is] those born

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