



Impact Statement

Iwan Wu, Grade 7

Martin Couney, 2026

Marker, paper, colored pencil on paper, 19 x 14 inches

We Art Education, Manhasset, NY

Unsung Hero: Martin Couney

I chose Martin Couney because I was interested in how he was able to save so many lives. I didn't know much about premature babies, and how back then they would not usually survive. Because of the limited technology back then, premature babies had a low chance of survival. However, the chances today are much higher, with us often overlooking the chances back then.

Martin A. Couney was a main pioneer in the early days of neonatal technology. He was born in 1896, in what is now Poland. Couney used to go by the name, "Michael Cohen" as well. Much of Martin's personal background and details kept on being changed, making most people skeptical about him. However, most people believed that he was an apprentice to Pierre-Constant Budin, a French obstetrician that founded modern-day medicine for mothers and fetuses. Martin is most widely known for his "Infantoriums", a show Martin would put up, displaying babies inside incubators. Incubators, at that time, were not widely used, and Couney wanted to spread the use of incubators because of their capabilities in the medical field. At these "Infantorium" shows, incubators held babies while keeping them warm and giving them fresh, filtered, air. Nurses at these shows cuddled and cared for these babies, such as bathing them and feeding them breastmilk. The workplace Martin created was clean and professional, and all the nurses were put on a strict diet by Martin. The main point of these shows was to show and demonstrate the abilities the incubator possesses. Along with the display of incubators, these shows were also meant to give premature babies a second chance. Martin believed that the incubator was able to give these babies a higher chance of survival. His work also fought back the eugenics movement, a theory in which humans can be improved and be better through specific breeding of a population. I respect his determination to give the premature babies a chance, while many others would have given up.

Couney is known to be one of the more important people in the field of neonatal technology, as he spread the ideas of incubators to many parts of the U.S. He is sometimes called, "The father of incubators" because of this. Before this large spread of incubators, Martin did attempt to donate some incubators to local hospitals. Although they rejected it at first, the use of incubators greatly increased around the time of Martin's death. Martin also saved many premature babies, giving them new life and another chance. He has been called a savior by many parents in desperation, as he gave medical care to these babies while other public hospitals didn't. His Infantorium shows faced backlash. Although Martin faced backlash from children protection groups, he still was able to continue and defend himself. These children protection groups

claimed that Martin was only doing these shows for money, when in reality, it was the opposite. The point of these shows was not for money, but for the care of these babies and demonstrations of incubators.

Couney also faced backlash from scientists in the eugenics movement. The eugenics movement, as stated before, was an inaccurate theory in which humans can be improved from their “deformities” through selective breeding and sterilization. Because many premature babies were usually left to die, many doctors participating in the eugenics movement called Couney absurd and ridiculous for trying to save them. Couney was able to brush off the backlash from these doctors as well and keep on going with his shows, especially after being supported by Julius Hess. Julius Hess is known as the father of U.S. neonatology.

The most surprising thing is that Martin is not a qualified medical doctor. Since his background kept on changing, as previously stated, nobody really knew what he did or what he qualified as. Despite this, Couney was able to save over 6,500 premature babies from death. Martin also did not care about the baby’s race and social class, allowing him to accept and give all babies a chance.

I wanted to present Couney in a way as if he was a god, giving new life to one that usually is kicked aside. The vines towards the left show a low and small heartbeat, with the vine looking almost wilted and dead, while the vine on the right shows a healthy and big heartbeat and vine. This is supposed to represent the life given to the premature baby from Couney. In the middle of the artwork, Couney holds the incubator in his hands in a way in which he looks like he is presenting the incubator. Inside the incubator displays a premature baby, sleeping on a blue cushion. Along with this, the dark gray background contrasts with the bright rays coming out of the incubator. The rays are supposed to represent light and hope in the dark background. Coming out of the incubator shows some butterflies that represent new life and hope as well. This entire piece of artwork is to show the new life that Martin brings to these babies with the incubator. I do this by showing things that could represent new life, such as the vine or the butterflies. I used alcohol markers and colored pencils to go with a realism style, a style that I rarely try and use.

I hope my artwork can show people that it’s good to give a second chance to something, even if it seems like it is not worth it. Like how Couney was able to save thousands of babies from death, we should try and give things a chance. With this artwork, I can show others that giving life a second chance is a good thing, and that all life, even if “defective” or not, should be appreciated.