

# The “baby hatch” from history to the third millennium

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## Abstract

The baby hatch is a prefabricated structure, easily reachable, formed by two small rooms; it offers total anonymity to the women who leave their baby, and maximum security to the small child.

The mother who decides to leave a child enters a room without passing through control, must open a tilting window and lay him in a cradle located in an adjoining room, which is maintained at a constant temperature in all four seasons.

An alarm, activated by a volumetric and contact sensor, immediately draws the attention of the first aid triage operators. A camera frames only the bed where the child lies and does not take a picture of the face of the person who puts the child in it.

## Keywords

Baby hatch, baby box.

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## History

In the past, the term “exposed” was another word for an abandoned baby, and the abandonment of unwanted children was a common practice among many populations [1]. The Jews forbade the killing of newborns but allowed parents to abandon or sell them if illegitimate. Moses was an illustrious abandoned child. In Greece, the legislation written by Lycurgus and Solon allowed not only the abandonment but also the infanticide. In Rome, fathers who did not want to recognize their children, with the so-called ritual of raising – “*levare*” – from the ground (from which the verb “*allevare*”), could take them to the “*columna lactaria*” so that the children were “exposed” to the public. Death by starvation awaited them at the foot of this column. At best they could become slaves to those who took them. There was a fate of tolerated selfishness of individuals and the community: the father got rid of the children he did not want, and the society eliminated the newborns in excess or in need of care. In the fourth century, with the arrival of Christianity, the idea of a first defense and protection of childhood began to emerge. In 315 AD, Emperor Constantine issued a law so that funds were found from taxes to rescue abandoned children or children of impoverished parents. Three years later, in 318 AD, Constantine condemned to death those who had practiced infanticide, but parents were allowed to sell their children. Justinian, in 500 AD, equated abandonment to infanticide.

In the West, the first hospice established for abandoned babies was the “*xenodochio*” founded in Milan in 787 AD by the archpriest Dateo.

The appearance of the first “*ruota degli esposti*” (baby hatch) took place in France in 1188, at the Hospital of Marseilles, followed shortly after by that of Aix en Provence and Toulon. The first Italian “*ruota degli esposti*” dates back to 1198 AD.

Pope Innocent III, troubled in his dreams by the recurrent vision of dead bodies of small children imprisoned in the nets of fishers of the Tiber, wanted it in Rome in the hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia. The “*ruota*” spread rapidly in the Mediterranean countries (France, Italy, Spain, and

Greece), but not in the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon countries.

In England, the “*ruota*” was never created, and infanticide was never considered a problem. Cadavers of fetuses or newborns killed in the most diverse ways were commonly found in sewers and landfills. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the growth of the European population, the debate around the “*ruota*” started. The population had risen from 100 to around 200 million in a few years. A considerable increase in the abandonment of children created severe economic problems for the administrations. The solution to contrast the increased expenses was to decrease the number of assisted children.

For that reason, in France, the idea of abolishing the “*ruota*” arose. The “*ruota*” was considered indeed uncivilized and crude, and cause of various abuses, for example welcoming even legitimate children and older children who did not even get into the “*ruota*” anymore. Even in Italy, the increase in the abandonment of children had become truly impressive; every year, from 30 to 40 thousand babies were left. The economic weight for maintenance had become unsustainable and only partly contained by the very high mortality of the abandoned children.

The orphanages were in poor conditions and were not able to adequately care for the little guests.

Between many discussions, the motivations of those who opposed the “*ruota*” prevailed. All the specimens of “*ruota*” were, finally, officially suppressed in 1923 with the “*General regulations for the service of assistance to the abandoned children*” by the first Mussolini government. Today, the Italian law gives women the right to give birth in anonymity, not to recognize their child, to be assisted and not to be judged.

## The law

The law recognizes the right of the child to grow up serenely in a family.

The Italian courts, if the mother does not recognize the newborn, can not research the paternity and can declare the state of abandonment and the possibility for the child to be adopted, if the biological parents have not recognized him.

## Our experience

Despite this legislation and a massive information campaign, some children were left in streets or inside bins in our territory, in the welfare era, with

global communication, and in the developed world, in old Europe, in the Capital of Italy [2-4].

This is why a debate between us, the medical staff of the Policlinico Casilino General Hospital, and the managers arose about the need to reactivate the old “ruota”, in a modern and technological appearance. We restored the old “ruota” and called it “baby-box”.

Of course, it is not connected to a sad convent or a cold sacristy, but a well-equipped department of pathology and neonatal intensive care. It could not be a wooden rotating wheel, but it is a heated and colored cradle, controlled by sensors and cameras.

What has remained in common with the medieval institution is the painful and sad choice of a mother who wants at all costs a better destiny for her little child.

### The baby box

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006, a protected structure called “Do not abandon him, entrust us” was inaugurated at the Policlinico Casilino General Hospital in Rome. The purpose is welcoming and assisting babies abandoned incongruously.

The baby hatch is a prefabricated structure, easily reachable, formed by two small rooms; it offers total anonymity to the women who leave their baby, and maximum security to the child.

The mother who decides to leave a child enters a room without passing through control, must open a tilting window and lay him in a cradle located in an adjoining room, which is maintained at a constant temperature in all four seasons (**Fig. 1**).

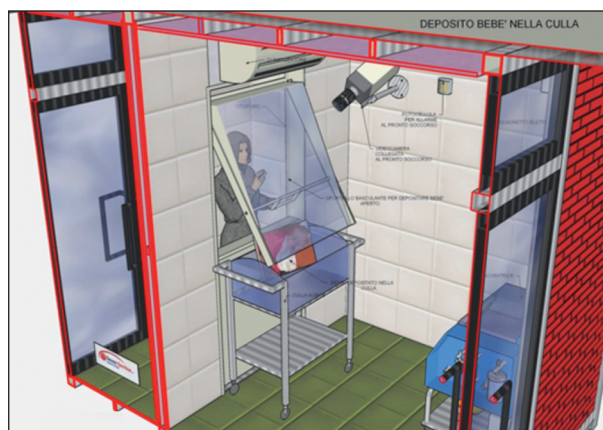
An alarm, activated by a volumetric and contact sensor, immediately draws the attention of the first aid triage operators. A camera frames only the bed where the child lies and does not take the face of the person who puts the child in it.

Nurses with a neonatologist arrive in a few minutes on the opposite side to the one from which the mother will come out (**Fig. 2**).

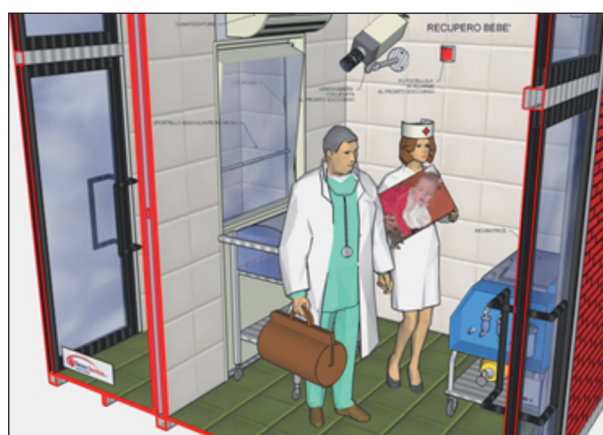
### Considerations

Unfortunately, many pregnant women find themselves unable to work, alone, sometimes reduced to slavery and threatened, with the fear of turning to public institutions as they fear being deceived by them.

These women experience moments of extreme difficulty and sometimes find themselves tragically forced to abandon their child.



**Figure 1.** The child is left in the cradle.



**Figure 2.** The child is rescued by a nurse and a neonatologist.

This modern and technological “ruota” has been created to help these mothers, and save small lives. It is not an invitation to illegal behavior, but it is a rescue so that an unwanted pregnancy does not end in tragedy.

### Results

After only two and a half months from its opening, the baby box welcomed a child of about two months, now adopted by a new family.

This case of abandonment was the first in a protected structure in Italy, for 19 years.

Since then, a “ruota” has been created in many Italian hospitals. This is also due to resources provided by the Rava Foundation with the project “Ninna Ho” [4], aimed at protecting abandoned children.

### Declaration of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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