

Fistula Hospital restores health and hope to Ethiopian women

by
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For nearly three decades, tens of thousands of Ethiopian women shunned by their husbands and families due to the problems associated with vesicovaginal fistulae have received surgical treatment and a renewed sense of self-confidence at Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa. The founder of the hospital, E. Catherine Hamlin, MB, BS, DRCOG, FACS(Hon), described the important work carried out at the center during a special program that took place during this year's Clinical Congress in Chicago, IL.

The mission

Dr. Hamlin and her late husband, Reginald Hamlin, MS, BS, MRCOG, established the hospital in 1974, after 15 years of seeing obstetrics-gynecology patients at the Princess Tsahai Hospital in Addis Ababa.

Drs. Hamlin arrived in Ethiopia in 1959 after several years of providing obstetrical and gynecological care in London, England, Hong Kong, and Adelaide, Australia. Originally, they planned to work in the underdeveloped African country for two to three years at the government hospital. Soon after joining the staff at the Princess Tsahai Hospital, however, the couple began seeing their first fistula patients.

Appalled by the condition of the young women, Drs. Hamlin set about teaching themselves how to repair the fissures through correspondence with international experts in the field. Their reputation for restoring the health and dignity of their patients grew, and to meet the increasing demand for the operation, they devoted themselves to

establishing a facility that would specialize in vesicovaginal fistula repair.

Vesicovaginal fistulae, abnormalities in the connection between the bladder and vagina, are all too common in the world's poorest countries because they occur when women undergo obstructed labor without medical assistance. They generally arise in teenagers who are experiencing their first childbirth and result in incontinence, which prompts rejection from their mates and families.

Given that the hospital's patients generally are poverty-stricken, Drs. Hamlin wanted to build a center that would provide the corrective medical services at no charge to the patient. Hence, the Hamlins built Fistula Hospital through donations and lived on Ethiopian physician salaries. Many of the nursing staff have been and continue to be former patients.

Meeting patient needs

The Hamlins also dedicated the hospital to the treatment of "the whole patient." Many of the young women arrive at the Fistula Hospital malnourished, with nerve or muscle damage due to prolonged labor, and emotionally scarred by familial condemnation or abuse. When these "pilgrims" (many of whom walk upwards of 100 miles in hopes of receiving assistance) arrive at the center, they are fed, offered a warm bed, and are given physiotherapy as needed.

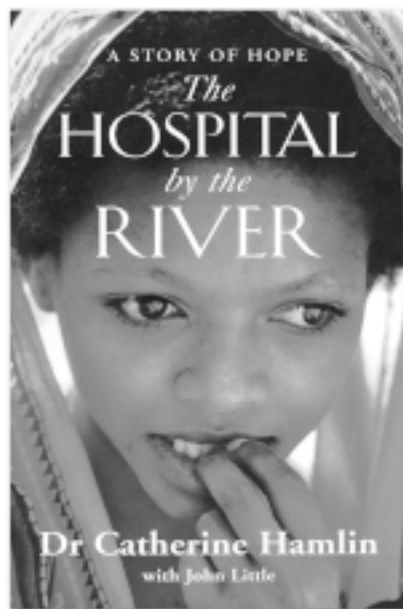
Once they are strong enough to undergo the procedure to repair the connection between the bladder and the vagina, the operation is performed using either a labial flap or a gracilis flap. The success rate is approximately 90 percent.

Upon recovery, those patients who can leave knowing that they have a safe place to go are sent home wearing a new dress. Those patients who are at risk of experiencing further ostracism or mistreatment may stay on at the center and enroll in literacy classes or other courses that will provide them with the skills they need to live independently.

Throughout their time at the hospital, the patients are treated with respect and care. "We want them to feel the love," Dr. Catherine Hamlin has said. "We don't want them just to become another case."

Ongoing efforts

Dr. Reginald Hamlin died in 1993, but Dr. Catherine Hamlin, now in her late seventies, con-



Dr. Hamlin's book about her experiences at the Fistula Hospital.

tinues to raise funds, direct the hospital, and operate on the patients who present with the most difficult conditions. The hospital runs on a comparatively meager annual budget, completing an average of 24 procedures per week at a cost of \$450 per case.

To help ensure that all Ethiopian women will have access to this important type of surgical care, all gynecology residents at the country's medical school rotate through Fistula Hospital, where Dr. Hamlin teaches. Furthermore, she offers ongoing support and supervision to gynecologists in remote parts of Ethiopia, and gynecologists from all over the world have come to train with her.

Dr. Hamlin was born in Sydney, Australia, and is a graduate of the University of Sydney. She trained at the Women's Hospital Crown Street, also in Sydney, where she met Dr. Reginald Hamlin, a native of New Zealand.

In recognition of her surgical skills, her vision, and her commitment to surgical education and care, Dr. Hamlin was named an Honorary Fellow of the College during the Convocation ceremonies at this year's Clinical Congress. 