



**HAMLIN
FISTULA
INTERNATIONAL**

Treatment, prevention and raising awareness of obstetric fistulas

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First impressions

Dr Catherine Hamlin's niece, Joanne Millar, has been visiting her aunt in Ethiopia. But for this visit, she did not travel alone.

In October I had the privilege of taking five other passionate women to visit the Ethiopia I love. We had an amazing time. Here I ask Denise about her first trip to this country.

Denise, what were your first impressions of Ethiopia and the city of Addis Ababa?

The thing that really struck me and something I was not prepared for was the poverty of the country. I was well aware that Ethiopia was a third world country, but the experience of arriving there and seeing first-hand the day-to-day struggle of the women and children in particular, was very confronting. I know—culturally—that women and children struggle, but what do their men do? I had the feeling that there were always people waiting for something to happen; waiting for a job, waiting to meet somebody, waiting for an opportunity to improve their life.

And your thoughts on the Fistula Hospital?

The Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital and later, Shamida Ethiopia (a private orphanage that hires former fistula patients as nannies, cleaners or cooks), were both inspirational. The staff work so hard for those less fortunate than themselves. Overwhelmingly the kindness, dedication, and commitment of these folk to make the lives of the people in their care more tolerable and enjoyable has stuck with me. The people themselves are the most respectful and happy people, who deal with

their situations as best as they can. The Ethiopian people are truly remarkable!

What was a trip highlight for you?

Meeting Dr Catherine Hamlin was the highlight of my trip! She is a woman who has both inspired and changed the life of so many people, both in Ethiopia and all over the world. I was reminded of this recently, at my best friend's birthday. I was talking to her two sons, both young doctors, and they expressed their envy at the opportunity that my daughter and I had to visit the Fistula Hospital and its founder, Dr Hamlin. They will now hear all about it!

One day will stay with me forever. We were at the hospital schoolroom where the patients were waiting after a lesson. We had come to enable these beautiful women to make a bead bangle and to mend any shawls (with the machine washing sometimes the stitching between the squares comes apart). When we entered, the floor was clean and shining. Within an hour, it was dotted with puddles of urine. This is the life of a fistula patient before surgery. I have been a nurse for 42 years and nothing could have prepared me for that and it brought me to tears then, and now as I write. This is something the western world would not understand. I felt so privileged to spend my time there and help in such a small way.

Any final thoughts, Denise?

After this trip I have many memories, but this time spent in Ethiopia has inspired me to do more. As Arnold Schwarzenegger said, "I'll be back".

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Asnaku.

“... Their love empowered me to feel comfortable and to know for the first time that there are people who still love me and treat me as a person. Here is my heartfelt thanks to them”

Good news stories from 2018

Each year, a group of women graduates from Desta Mender, the village where they have learned skills for life, for self-care, and for future work. The 2018 graduation produced some happy women with wonderful stories. Here are just two of those stories.

Like most rural girls in Ethiopia, Asnaku Adugna, now 48, neither attended school nor enjoyed her childhood. She spent a childhood full of hardships, helping her mother and caring for the family’s animals. Her too- short childhood ended at 15 when she married a farmer and became a housewife.

Her first pregnancy at 18 ended with three days of labour at home, resulting in a double fistula and a severe leg injury. “On the third day of unbearable labour my father finally ignored the warnings of villagers not to take me to the closest health facility. He walked for three hours, me lying swollen on a handmade stretcher. By the time we reached there the professionals told us that I had serious complications and referred me to the nearby government hospital, nine hours walking distance from the clinic”, she said. “By the time I

became conscious, I found myself lying on a soaked hospital bed, unable to move my legs and doubly incontinent. I still feel the pain whenever I think of the depression I felt back then.”

After a month in hospital, Asnaku was referred to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital. Her father had to sell some family assets in order to get enough money for transportation, so Asnaku was carried back to her village until her father could collect the money. She remained at home—unmoving, incontinent and ashamed for a year. Finally, she was able to go to Addis, thanks to the love and commitment of her father. “He held me in his two hands like a baby in all the long bus drive, and at the end we arrived at this beautiful hospital where I got cure for both the physical and psychological effect of fistula” she said.

“The death of my father 20 years


ago was the biggest loss in my life”, she said. “I lost the only person who had been supportive in all ways to me. My husband had left me, so I started living with family members who treated me as a servant just because I lived with fistula. After many long years of abuse by my own family I started an independent and lonely life struggling sometimes even to get food”, Asnaku remembers.

But Asnaku’s fistula journey, though long and heart-breakingly difficult finally has a happy ending!

She had her first surgery performed by Dr. Reg Hamlin, 30 years ago. The rectal fistula was cured and, with extensive treatment, she also recovered from the leg injury. She remembers, “Back then it was only the Hamlins who perform the surgery and what surprised me most was the love and compassion they both showed to the patients. It was unique and a cure on itself. Their love empowered me to feel comfortable and to know for the first time that there are people who still love me and treat me as a person. Here is my heartfelt thanks to them” said Asnaku.

The urinary fistula proved much harder to treat. She lived with it for over 15 years, as Dr Catherine Hamlin tried other surgeries to no avail, as her injury was so extensive and complex. But at least Asnaku’s life was more bearable, as she learned to care for herself, and manage the incontinence.

Then, in June 2018 Asnaku decided



“We hardly ate to save money, because accommodation costs took all the money we had. My being at Hamlin was like good news of survival!”

Sinke.

to try one final, difficult surgery. Dr Fekade, the Medical Director, totally cured her forever by performing a diversion surgery. Asnaku was then assessed by the social worker, and went off for rehabilitation training at Desta Mender. She graduated as one of the 19th round graduates on Thursday 30, August 2018! “Thanks to the integrated support I received from this hospital I have now started dreaming of the future”, she said. “Using the training I got at Desta Mender I plan to have my own business at the closest town to my village and lead a happy life afterwards.”



SINKE AGMASE is one of the lucky ones. All six of the daughters born to her are still living. Her first five labours were straightforward, but the sixth one—though it resulted in a live birth—seemed unusually long and difficult.

“At first everything looked normal, but as days passed, I noticed that I was unable to urinate for two weeks. So I was taken to the nearby government hospital and while I was being treated I felt something burst inside and urine flooded out. I was frustrated and ashamed of myself”, Sinke recalls.

After a two week stay at the hospital, Sinke went back home without any solution. She remained incontinent for eight years. “I concluded that it was absolutely incurable. The incontinence damaged my whole family;

my daughters had difficulty at school, and we all lost the smiles and happiness we used to have. We have been in deep sorrow for the last eight years”

Finally, her eldest daughter decided to bring her to the capital Addis Ababa in search of a cure. “Fistula forced me to lead a hidden and isolated life. I never told to anyone in the village about it. They thought I had a kidney problem. All these sufferings had forced me to try for a permanent cure”, Sinke said.

Once they got to Addis, Sinke and her daughter did not really know where to go to get help. They spent about a month visiting various referral hospitals until, finally, they were referred to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital. “By the time we got the referral papers we were almost out of money. We hardly ate to save money, because accommodation costs took all the money we had. My being at Hamlin was like good news of survival!” Sinke explains.

In March 2018 she arrived at the main hospital in the capital city. She underwent four months of focused treatment ending with a diversion surgery which allowed Sinke to become totally dry. “I was at the edge of hopelessness when I come here and never thought that I would get cured in such short time. You made what I think was impossible, possible. My deepest thanks to Emaye (Dr. Catherine) for establishing such a heavenly care center for the poorest like myself. To the staff:

please take my gratitude for the love and care you gave. You can’t imagine how happy you made me”, Sinke said.

On August 30, 2018 Sinke was one of the graduates from the three months of holistic rehabilitation training at Desta Mender. She will soon be reintegrated to home village, where she will continue being a joyous mother and grandmother. But as well as that, she is now able to start her own small business with the seed money she received.

SINKE’S AND ASNAKU’S STORIES are like so many others. What began as shame, suffering and desperation has ended with joy, hope and confidence. The work and legacy of Reg and Catherine Hamlin goes on. When they first arrived in Ethiopia, almost 60 years ago, no-one could have foreseen the impact they would have on an illness which has been a scourge to women for thousands of years, on the country of Ethiopia, or—most importantly—on women like Asnaku and Sinke.

January 24, 2019 will mark Dr Catherine Hamlin’s 95th birthday. A small donation to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital or to Desta Mender would be a birthday present she would love!

A summit for midwives

By Robyn Powell

In July of this year, the first ever Hamlin Midwifery Alumni Network (HMAN) Summit was held.

The aim of the Summit was held to kick off the Hamlin Midwifery Alumni Network. Among many other goals it set out to present recognition awards, enable feedback on midwifery training, and identify and develop leadership attributes for midwives. Altogether, 86 midwives from five regions attended, and recognition awards were presented to one midwife from each of the regions for exceptional contribution or leadership.

The midwives' feedback was very positive: "It was an amazing day!" was the most often heard comment. The midwives were thrilled to be together and to have a chance to connect with their peers from other regions, or their classmates from the College of Midwives.

Hamlin believes that establishment of the alumni will have significant contribution for sustaining quality of education at the Hamlin College of Midwives and beyond. Furthermore, the College has learnt quite a lot from the

summit, especially that it could serve as a vehicle to get feedback from the young deployed midwives. God willing, another summit will be held next year.



The building progresses

Construction at the Addis Ababa Hospital continues, despite the bad weather. The Administration and the laboratory/pathology/pharmacy buildings are slowly rising from the mud, and all being well, the new buildings should be ready for an opening in June of next year.

This building has been made possible by the kind bequest of a lady some years ago. She will be remembered at the grand opening next year.

If you would like to remember the work of Dr Catherine Hamlin in your will, please speak to your solicitor about it. It is one wonderful way to ensure that operating funds for the hospital will continue into the future, that more and more midwives will be trained, or even that something as huge as a new wing for the hospital could be built.





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