



HAMLIN  
FISTULA  
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*Treatment, prevention and raising awareness of obstetric fistulas*

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# March birthday celebrations

January 24 has always been a special day for the Hamlin staff. It is the birthday of Dr Catherine Hamlin, who passed away in March, 2020.

In Ethiopia there is a tradition of celebrating the date of departure of a loved one each year for seven years. After Dr Hamlin's passing, there was discussion amongst the staff about whether this celebration would stick to the tradition, or whether her birthday – which was always celebrated – would be a better time to remember and celebrate her life. Finally, an agreement was reached to continue to celebrate her birthday on January 24.

At the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital, it is believed that Emaye (Mother) is still alive through her continued work. So in 2021, the 97th birthday of Emaye was celebrated with much joy, with Emaye herself at the very centre of the party. Staff and patients attended; poems about Dr Hamlin's work were presented along with many speeches. Music and a traditional cake-cutting rounded out the celebration of a long life, well lived.



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Special thanks to everyone who provided photographs for this newsletter.



# The College gets back to work

In March 2020, all 98 students at the Hamlin College of Midwives were sent back to their homes, in line with government recommendations. With the help of email study groups, students were able to continue their studies from their homes.

**N**ow they have returned to Addis Ababa, and the Hamlin College of Midwives is back in action! First-year students completed their theoretical classes and practical attachments and began their second-year classes on April 17, 2021. There is no second-year batch, as that cohort progressed to third year. In fact, there are

now two batches of third-year students. The first batch completed their second semester theoretical classes, their practical attachments and their exams, and moved into fourth year on April 17, 2021. The second batch of third year students completed their first semester theoretical classes and are now doing their seven weeks of clinical attachment.

The College is looking forward to seeing the long-awaited new batch of students. Hopefully, a class of 30 students – many from the regions of Afar, Benshangul and Gambella – will begin in the new academic year, if COVID is sufficiently contained and government restrictions allow.



The graduating class of 2020 had no official ceremony because of COVID-19 restrictions. It was particularly sad for everyone at the College, as it was the first graduation after the passing of its founder, Dr Catherine Hamlin.

In his congratulatory message on the graduation bulletin Tesfaye Mamo, the Chief Executive Officer of Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia said, “You are unique in many aspects and your batch will be remembered for graduating amid the COVID-19 pandemic. I really want to say how much I appreciate your dedication to completing your practical attachment and all the other requirements of your degree during this global crisis. You have shown your commitment to serving your communities by being tenacious in completing your studies during the outbreak.”



# Hope in sadness

COVID-19 hit Ethiopia hard. More than 224,000 people have had the virus and more than 3,000 deaths were reported in the year from March 2020, to March 2021. The virus is still circulating in the country and infection rates have grown exponentially affecting many people involved with the Fistula Hospital and other centres.

In March this year, more than 20 staff tested positive. That is a positivity rate of more than 13 per cent. The rate may be higher, as some on staff were not tested because of the limited availability of test kits. Only those with severe symptoms and those in close contact with positive people were tested. Sadly, Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia lost one of its staff to COVID-19 in March this year. HFE's decline in surgical performance at some centres is attributable to the absence of core staff because of COVID-19 infections. There has been a huge emotional toll associated with managing activities amid COVID-19 infections and, above all, the loss of a much-loved member of staff.

But in the midst of stress and sadness comes the hope of vaccinations. March was a really big month, as it also marked the first vaccinations of HFE staff. The Ministry of Health fast-tracked the process and supplies of the AstraZeneca vaccination and first shots were given on March 31, 2021 in the grounds of the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital. Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia's Chief Executive Officer Tesfaye Mamo became the first person vaccinated as an example to members of staff who were feeling unsure about it.



HFE CEO, Tesfaye Mamo, getting the first AstraZeneca jab at Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital

## The sad cost of COVID

Kerubish Tadesse was born and raised in a remote rural village in Northern Ethiopia around Gojjam. Twenty years ago, at the age of 18, she suffered a devastating birth injury, and arrived at the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital as a patient.

Following a difficult surgical procedure, Dr Catherine and her medical team decided to keep Kerubish close by for intensive follow up and treatment. As she had no relatives in Addis to stay with, she remained at Desta Mender for some time. When she was well enough, she joined Hamlin as a nursing aide in May 2007.

Kerubish spent most of her time at Hamlin working in the Dr Reginald Hamlin Operating Theatre helping patients during and after their surgeries. She is remembered among her friends and colleagues at the hospital for her smiling face, friendly character and

sense of humour. Several months ago, she became so ill she was readmitted to the hospital as a patient. She then tested positive for COVID-19 which worsened her condition, and after enormous efforts of doctors both inside and outside the hospital, she passed away on March 21, 2021. Her departure has saddened not only her relatives, but all members of the Fistula Hospital family.

Yetimwork, one of Kerebish's closest friends, paid tribute to her. "Kerubish was one of the kindest and strongest women I have ever known. Regardless of her health condition she was a source of fun and happiness for everybody around. At the same time, she was an example to us, as she showed us how to struggle with life and live for dream. She started school with no education and reached grade seven. Her death is a big grief for me. I lost my best friend and role model. May God rest her soul in peace."

On March 21, 2021 Kerubish's funeral took place at

an Orthodox church in Addis Ababa in the presence of her family members, HFE management members, staff and friends.

Kerubish died on the anniversary of Dr Catherine's death.

We pray for God's comfort to her family and friends.



# A story of the oldest Fistula patient

Bijige does not know how old she is, as she has no birth certificate. She was born at home in a remote rural village, where home births are still the norm.



Education was a luxury in Bijige's youth, so she spent her childhood learning how to be a good housewife until she entered into an arranged marriage and started a family while she was still a teenager. "I was so happy in my married life," she said. "I had my first daughter, now aged 50, from it and I led a joyful life with my caring husband. This joy, however, didn't last long. My second pregnancy five years later ruined my life and I was left with complete sadness for over three decades."

Bijige prepared to deliver her second child at home. But things went wrong very quickly. She laboured at home for two long days. On the third day, worried family members carried on the unconscious Bijige on a handmade stretcher towards the closest government clinic two hours away. The nurses at the clinic have helped Bijige to deliver a stillborn baby and saved her life.

"When I woke up, I found myself lying on a soaked bed and asked the nurses what happened," she said. "They told me it was because of the complication and might stop afterwards. Then I asked about my baby and learned the sad truth. I returned home

with a heavy heart and much grief. Day in, day out my situation never changed at all. Urine flowed uncontrollably whether I walked, sat or slept. I felt ashamed of myself and wished I had died with my baby rather than living in such agony."

Fistula left Bijige and her little daughter with an almost unbearable life challenge. Her husband left suddenly and married another woman. Bijige became helpless and moved to her father's place with her daughter where they were able to live in the separate small hut her father built for her. Soon after, her daughter was married and she was left lonely. "Because of this injury I even never attend my daughter's wedding properly. I became completely dependent first on my father then on my only daughter. I stopped seeing people and restricted myself to the small hut I lived in. As time went on, I start believing that I was born to live with it and I became completely hopeless," she said.

After almost 40 years of misery, Bijige was found by government health professionals visiting her village and was then taken to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital. She was warmly welcomed by medical staff and her holistic treatment began. The nursing aides, who are fistula survivors themselves, made sure that she had clean clothes and bedsheets. They chatted with her in her own language to help her to relax and feel at home. She was given support as well as medications to prepare her for surgery.

"This is God's plan. I had been brought to Addis Ababa

before but no one told me about this hospital. I didn't hear about the hospital until the government bodies appeared in my village. Now, after 20 years, here I am again in the city and inside the beautiful compound with staff who give unconditional love and care for every one of us! I feel regret that I didn't know the hospital earlier," she says.

A week later she had her first surgery, and on April the 2nd 2021 she was confirmed cured by the doctors and discharged with a new dress and money for transport to her home. "Although I am an old woman close to my grave my cure means a lot to me. I will live the rest of my life without being anguished, ashamed and depressed. I thank God and every single one of you here at the hospital for letting me see the impossible become possible. You are life givers," she said.

Speaking about Bijige, Dr Yisheneh Medical Director of Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia (HFE) said, "Bijige's case is one that is rarely seen these days. She suffered from the injury for over three decades and never got information about us in those long years. Luckily, she didn't have complications and was cured with a simple surgery. Her case is an indication that there are still untreated women out there in rural parts of the country and we are planning new approaches to find and treat them. HFE is now implementing new patient identification program to find more women like Bijige."

