



HAMLIN
FISTULA
AUSTRALIA

Treatment, prevention and raising awareness of obstetric fistulas

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Ethiopian Easter

Roughly fifty percent of Ethiopia's population belongs to the Orthodox church. So, Easter – *Fasika* or *Tinsae* – is an important celebration throughout the nation.

Easter comes after a 55 day fasting period, known as *Hudade* or the Fast of the Great Lent, and goes on to be celebrated until the *Dagma-Tinsae*, which we know as Pentecost.

After a special church service on Saturday that lasts well into the early hours of Sunday morning, the awaited day arrives. After attending the gathering, people go to their homes to break the two-month-long fast, marking the beginning of the Easter holiday. As followers abstained from meat and dairy products during the fasting season, the Easter feast makes up for that. The tradition is to eat a full meal from one plate. This develops a sense of sharing and love between friends and family. Over-indulgence can be a real problem after the long fast, so doctors often advise people to take it slowly on the meals as their bodies need time to adapt to a new diet!

Easter 2022 was celebrated in late April, and after two years of COVID lockdowns and restrictions was a particularly joyous time.

Melkam Fasika to all our friends!



Dr Catherine Hamlin with her son Richard at Easter in 2015. Members of the local Orthodox church also took part in the service.



In 2017, Dr Barbara Kwast from Sweden visited the Addis Ababa hospital. She helped Dr Hamlin cut the special Easter bread which was then shared with the staff.

Back to Ethiopia

By Denis Pontin – Hamlin Fistula Australia Board Member

I arrived in Addis Ababa 31 March 2022 to spend a week with staff at Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia, and to visit the Midwives College and Desta Mender. I was also able to visit Harar, a hospital built in 2008, which is part of the Harar University Medical School. There I met with Dr Letu the young Medical Director who had previously worked at Juma Hospital in Harar for three years. Though his family lives near Addis Ababa, he loves his work as a fistula surgeon and is performing over 40 surgeries each month.



Harar Hamlin Fistula Centre is the fourth centre to reach completion and was officially opened by Dr Catherine Hamlin in 2008. Strategically placed in the east of the country, the centre will treat both Ethiopian and Somali women due to its proximity to the Somali border. The centre is located on the grounds of the Hiwot Fana Government Hospital on land donated by the Regional Government. All surgery is performed by Dr Letu (above). There is a head nurse and operating theatre nurse. In addition to these trained nurses the hospital has a number of former fistula patients who are nursing

aides and they ensure that high quality patient care is provided and maintained at the centre. Dr Letu could not speak highly enough of these former patients and the role they play in patient care.

My main reason for going to Ethiopia on behalf of the HFA Board was to meet with Tesfaye Mamo the CEO and staff to review plans for accommodation and expansion of the library, teaching facilities and dining/kitchen and café at the College. This next stage in the building of the Midwives College has resulted from the commencement of the Master of Science program.

I was able to meet many of the 33 Masters students currently studying at the College in the first year of this program. They are staying at Desta Mender and the College has been creative in the use of existing teaching and library space to allow this first year of the MSc program to commence.

I was able to meet with Yoseph

Bereded from Abba Architects who worked on the design of the Addis Hospital, Desta Mender and the College as well as the regional hospitals. Yoseph is working on the concept plans to expand the College to cater for the MSc program while Hamlin Fistula Australia is seeking a detailed cost plan and scope of works, after further consultation with College staff to enable this work to commence.

In line with the prevention of fistulas, the commencement of a MSc program at the Hamlin College of Midwives is a significant step forward. At the last Partners Meeting some three years ago in Addis Ababa the MSc program was presented to all the International Partners and was enthusiastically supported. The 33 students (around 30% are male midwives) currently enrolled will undertake two and a half years of study with various placements and practical experience in hospitals and Health Centres.



It is so important that Australians continue to support the work of the hospital in treating and preventing fistulas in Ethiopia. The target is to have visited every settlement in every Woreda by 2025, having identified any fistula cases and assisted them to a Hamlin Hospital for treatment and cure. The high quality of the Hamlin midwives's undergraduate degree program has enabled Hamlin midwives to be employed in Government Health Centres to assist in the prevention of fistulas. The MSc program continues this work and provides opportunity for highly qualified and experienced midwives to work regionally in Ethiopia to lift the standard of maternal health care and prevent birth injuries.

HFA is willing to support ongoing training of surgeons at Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital (AAFH) under the auspices of the International Federation

of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO). This will build the capacities of HFE and overseas fistula surgeons, 'FIGO Fellows' and multidisciplinary teams so that they are able to provide surgical treatment and specialised care for women suffering from obstetric fistula in some of the world's most underserved communities.

The cost of building additional library, teaching, dining and kitchen facilities and supporting infrastructure at the College of Midwives is significant. With support from generous donors this can be achieved, and we can still provide ongoing financial assistance for projects like a fire access road and a new bore to ensure the AAFH has safe access and enough water. Other projects discussed with Tesfaye during my visit included harvesting rainwater and the possibility of storing solar energy generated by photovoltaic

panels on the roof of hospitals and other buildings to enable the facilities to be 'self-sufficient' and reduce power and water costs significantly.

The reason I am privileged to be part of the Hamlin Fistula Australia Board is to see the smiles and sheer joy on the faces of Ethiopian women, mainly young women, who have just been healed of incontinence.

During the last years of her life, Catherine was confident that her legacy would live on. She said, "When I die, this place will go on for many, many years until we have eradicated fistula altogether – until every woman in Ethiopia is assured of a safe delivery and a live baby."

It was a great encouragement to me to see the work which Catherine and Reg pioneered so long ago, still flourishing.

From fixing injury to fixing life

Asmira is now about 40 years old. She lives with her two daughters and Lemma Alemne, her husband of 25 years. Her third pregnancy resulted in a long labour and serious damage to her bladder. Asmira and Lemma had spent all the money they had searching for a cure, until they finally arrived at Bahirdar Hamlin Fistula Hospital. Asmira's case was complicated, and the fistula could not be cured with the first treatment. She had to live with incontinence for five years until she and her husband were able to return for a complete cure. After diversion surgery at the main hospital in Addis Ababa, she went through rehabilitation and reintegration training at Desta Mender and returned to her village to start a business using the seed money she was given at the end of her reintegration.

"Before the reintegration I had nothing to eat or wear," she said. "We lived by luck. After I passed through Desta Mender's training and reintegration, my life changed. The education equipped me with confidence in fighting for my right, and now the farmland which was taken from me has been legally returned. The seed money

I received five years ago has now grown. I have constructed a new and better home. Emaye (Dr. Catherine) gave me back my health and became a source of wealth to my family."

Lemma has been by her side in all her sufferings as well as her successes. In thanking everyone at Hamlin Fistula he said, "Because of her devastating problem my wife was restricted to home. Now she visits markets with friends, goes to church, eats and drinks whatever she wants and looks after her health. The seed money you gave her changed our life. We have been working hard to raise our income. I work on the farm, and she handles the market. Currently we have enough food to feed our family for over a year, we have a new house, two cows, and have planted cash crops on our farm. The seed money was the start of all this. You brought happiness back to our home and I can't thank you enough for your generosity."

Asmira's happiness is visible to everyone in her smiling face and the warm welcome she provides to all who enter her home. Her daughters are in a good health, her home is clean, and she lives in a modern Ethiopian way.

The devastation of a fistula injury has turned into a blessing, providing hope for Asmira, her family, and everyone who hears of the everyday miracles still being performed through Hamlin Fistula hospitals, doctors and midwives.



Bringing hope



For nearly 20 years the Hamlin College of Midwives has been a beacon not just for Ethiopia, but all of Africa in the recruitment, training and deployment of clinical midwives. All students need to attend 40 deliveries before they graduate, and they then commit to working a further four years in midwifery clinics throughout the country. Many of these young graduates end up in very remote and

under-resourced clinics, where the most vulnerable women would once have routinely expected the death of their child, a life-long fistula injury, or even their own death. Of all the good things to come out of Drs Reg and Catherine Hamlin's work in Ethiopia, the College of Midwives is one of the greatest.

But why stop there? A new postgraduate Master of Science degree in Clinical Midwifery began this year, with an intake of more than 30 students. This degree will ensure a generation of qualified midwives, and midwifery educators will continue to add to Reg and Catherine Hamlin's great legacy to the nation of Ethiopia.

But expanding the College means more funds will be needed. More and more young women are applying for the Midwifery Course, and the post graduate degree. They will need accommodation, library books, computers and world class

lecturers so that the Hamlin College of Midwives can retain its reputation as Africa's leading trainer and supplier of midwives. Over and over again, we hear former patients of these midwives speak about the healing their bodies have received, and the hope that now fills their souls after successful treatment.

Can you help in this vital work? Can you be a part of that healing and hope?

Any donation, no matter how small, will help to provide new facilities for the College of Midwives so that more and more women, families, and communities are freed from the hopeless scourge of fistula which, until the arrival of the Hamlins over 60 years ago, robbed so many people of joy and hope for the future.

Please use the form included in this newsletter to make your donation to Catherine Hamlin's great desire to see fistula eradicated forever.