

ANZAC Day *in Addis*

ON APRIL 25TH THIS year, an ANZAC Day dawn service was held at St. Matthew's Anglican Church in Addis Ababa. Afterwards, the Australian Ambassador Mark Sawers and his wife Anais Maro hosted a breakfast at the Hilton Hotel. Every ambassador in the city was invited to pay tribute to the memories of the Australian and New Zealand troops who served at Gallipoli. Australian and New Zealand expatriates enjoyed the opportunity to get together. Dr Catherine Hamlin was an honoured guest at the gathering.



Dr Catherine Hamlin sitting next to the Australian ambassador Mark Sawers and his wife Anais Maro

The village that deserves its name

Joy.

It is such a little word. But it is a powerful word. “Joy” is much more than cheerfulness, happiness or feeling good. The word “joy” implies a deep and abiding emotion that is much harder to shift or influence than mere happiness. It is not a word that you would normally associate with fistula patients. A woman who suffers the pain, indignity, exclusion and loneliness of a condition that cuts her off from her family, her community and useful work. How can she ever find joy again?

The answer to that question is Desta Mender.

The work of Drs Reg and Catherine Hamlin over the past 60 years has been little short of miraculous, in the astonishing cure rate of women suffering the birth trauma known as obstetric fistula. It is impossible to count the number of women they have helped to return to a full and productive life; to their villages and families, to new, safely-born children. But fistula is a terrible, complicated

injury. Where most women can be cured to a point of practical normality, there is still a percentage of cases where the damage is so severe, perhaps through years and years of neglect, perhaps due to the complete destruction of an organ, where it simply cannot be fixed. In many cases, the condition can be improved dramatically. But for some women, the stigma of using a stoma bag (which is attached to a small, surgically created opening on the surface of the

abdomen, in order to divert the flow of faeces and/or urine) is too much to allow them to ever return home. They will need to be close to a hospital for the rest of their lives, in order to obtain new stoma bags as well as help to manage the condition, if needed. In the early 2000s, Dr Hamlin came up with a plan to create a place where women who can never be completely cured could live the rest of their lives in peace, and in usefulness. They would be trained and educated in simple but practical things like small-scale farming, sewing and other handicrafts. She decided to call it Desta Mender – Joy Village.

But who could possibly be found to get this place up and running? As so often happens, the first port of call for Dr Hamlin was family. She put in a phone call to her brother Jock Nicholson and his wife Louise. They are farmers in the north of New South Wales, at Limbri, near Tamworth.

Jock chuckles as he recalls that phone call from Ethiopia. “We got the phone call from Catherine and, in



Dr Hamlin walks through the serene gardens of Desta Mender



Louise and Jock Nicholson and their son David on a visit to Desta Mender

those days, she used to talk in a very high pitched voice because the phone lines were pretty awful". He raises his voice in imitation, in the way that brothers have of teasing their sisters. "Can you come over and help us start a farm for the girls?" she said." It took a good deal of time and prayer for Jock and Louise to make up their minds to leave their own farm to start a farm for people they did not know so far away. He laughs again as he tells the story of the day they announced to their church that they were thinking about going. "The whole congregation came up and put their hands on us and prayed for us. As we were driving home that day, I said to Louise, 'Well, I don't know if we are going to Ethiopia, but we have certainly been given the boot here!'"

Of course, in due time, Jock the farmer and Louise the nurse fitted like hands into the work gloves of Desta Mender. Jock oversaw the beginnings of the dairy and the poultry farm while Louise used her medical expertise to get a dispensary up and running. She still says it was one of the happiest

times of her life. "The girls had such depth to them. They had been through such hardship and suffering. Not only that, but their families had given them away and that was an area of great suffering to them. But when they came into the little cottages at Desta Mender, they all came together, became friends, and began to make as happy a life as they could."

The work of Desta Mender has prospered and grown in the 15 years since Jock and Louise ploughed the first furrows. The village, built on land given by the Ethiopian government is about 20 kilometres from the hospital at Addis Ababa and sits beautifully beside a mountain. One visitor described it as looking almost like a resort! The market gardens, orchard and dairy farm supply fruit, vegetables, eggs and milk not only to the village itself, but also to the hospital in Addis.

In 2009, The Juniper Café opened. Women have been taught culinary and hospitality skills, as they supply visitors to the village with cakes, soups and pies. The famous Aussie meat pie

features on the menu! Not only are the women of the village now running the Café entirely by themselves, some have left Desta Mender and opened their own café not far away.

As with everything in life, plans change as life unfolds. The success of Desta Mender has been so much more than anyone could have dreamed. Instead of a sort of retirement village, it has become a hive of industry, plans and dreams achieved and yet to come.

It takes a lot of money to care for just one person living at Desta Mender. It is a lot more than the care of an average fistula patient at the hospital, but how much extra work that money does is immeasurable. The money supplies education, training, friendship, usefulness and joy. Through the work of Dr Hamlin, through the pioneering labour of the Nicholsons, as well as those who care for, teach and inspire the women of Desta Mender, women are being empowered, changed and released from shame and indignity. Truly, Joy Village is the best named place in Ethiopia.



These vegetables will feed everyone in the village...and supply the hospital as well!



Preparing for service at the Juniper Cafe

Partners International Meeting

By Dr David Knox



David Knox visiting Dr Hamlin and Mamite



Denis Pontin, David Knox and Dr Ephrem Tekele
Chair of HFE board

Representatives from nine supporting international trusts met with the Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia board and senior management team over two full days in early June this year. Doug Marr, Denis Pontin and I attended from Hamlin Fistula Australia Ltd and Carolyn Hardy and David Winterbottom came from the Catherine Hamlin Fistula Foundation (previously Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia Australia).

Results for the last year were presented and exciting new initiatives were discussed.

The urogynaecology fellowship program has been a great success with two fistula surgeons, Drs Fikade and Melaku, graduating this year. The incidence of fistula is decreasing and so the hospital is aiming to become a centre of excellence in prolapse surgery as well.

There is a proposal to develop a master's program in midwifery so

the Hamlin midwives can further their education and skills to become mentors and teachers with the aim of reducing maternal mortality and morbidity further. This will require a significant increase in the budget. Just setting up the program will require about four million dollars, and a further one million dollars a year will be needed to keep the program going. It seems like a lot of money, but we know that even a small donation can make such a difference! The maternal death rate in Ethiopia has been reduced by 50 percent in the last five years by the development and deployment of maternity services across the country, but there is still a long way to go. Our great hope is that this midwifery master's program will go a long way in helping to reduce it even further.

Forty percent of Hamlin health centres in remote rural areas have no running water, so efforts are underway to develop a reliable bore water supply.

Furthermore, blackouts are frequent, and 56 solar suitcases (a compact solar charged battery unit) have been distributed to provide midwives with light for deliveries. Many health centres will be provided with a portable ultrasound scanner after further training of midwives

Everyone I spoke to was positive and excited about the future, and especially about the prospect of eventual elimination of fistula possibly within the next five years! In Ethiopia

This would be a wonderful fulfilment of the Hamlins' legacy.

I took the opportunity to visit my aunt, Catherine Hamlin, and found her well but tired. She enjoyed catching up with all the family news, and was thrilled with the gift of a scarf from her sister, Ailsa. She continues to be so grateful for the support her work receives from all over the world.

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