



HAMLIN  
FISTULA  
AUSTRALIA

*Treatment, prevention and raising  
awareness of obstetric fistulas*

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# Vale Emaye

Dr Catherine Hamlin

24 January 1924 – 18 March 2020

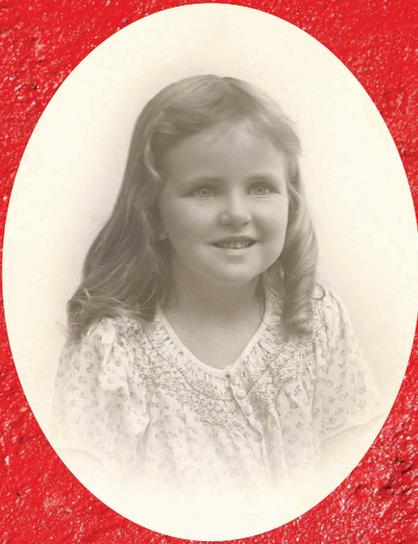


Dr Catherine Hamlin and her beloved patients.

In 2020 Dr Catherine Hamlin marked her 61st year in Ethiopia. She lived most of her life there, in her original house on the grounds of her Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital, adored by her patients, staff and the Ethiopian people. She was often referred to as “Emaye” meaning Mother. Catherine was not just committed to spending her life treating thousands of women, she spent her whole adult life changing lives.

**Hamlin Fistula Australia Limited** Administering the Hamlin Fistula Relief and Aid Fund  
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The young Catherine Nicholson, age 7.

In 1958, the Hamlins answered an advertisement in *The Lancet* medical journal for gynaecologists to set up a school of midwifery in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Together with five-year-old Richard, they travelled to Ethiopia to take up the contract. Once Catherine and Reg started work at the Princess Tsehai Memorial Hospital, they found themselves treating women suffering obstetric complications on a scale unimaginable in a western hospital. What had been intended as a three-year stay in Addis Ababa turned into a lifetime of service to the Ethiopian people.

Before the Hamlins arrived in Ethiopia, patients with obstetric fistulas who sought medical help at the Princess Tsehai Memorial Hospital were turned away as there was no cure for their humiliating condition. It was during these testing years that the Hamlins began to make plans to eradicate fistula in their adopted country.

It took many years, but finally, the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital opened on May 24, 1975. There are now six Hamlin Fistula Hospitals across Ethiopia. Over the past 61 years, more than 60,000 Ethiopian women suffering with an obstetric fistula have received life-changing reconstructive surgery and care, changing their lives and the lives of their families and communities forever.

Catherine's initial goal of training midwives became a reality in 2007

**Elinor Catherine Nicholson** was born on January 24, 1924, one of six children to Elinor and Theodore Nicholson, who lived in the Sydney suburb of Ryde. She graduated from the University of Sydney's Medical School in 1946, then accepted a residency in obstetrics at Sydney's Crown Street Women's Hospital where she met and fell in love with Dr Reginald (Reg) Hamlin. They married in 1950 and had a son, Richard, in 1953.

when the Hamlin College of Midwives opened. High school graduates are trained in a four-year Bachelor of Science degree, then deployed to rural midwifery clinics, where they are most needed, breaking the cycle of unrelieved obstructed labour and thereby preventing obstetric fistula from occurring in the first place.

In 1983, Catherine was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) and in 1995 appointed to the higher rank in the Order, a Companion (AC) for 'service to gynaecology in developing countries particularly in the field of fistula surgery and for humanitarian service to improving the health dignity and self-esteem of women in Ethiopia'. In 2001, the Australian Government recognised Catherine's 'long and outstanding service to international development in Africa' by awarding her the Australian Centenary Medal. In recognition of her humanitarian work in Ethiopia she was included on the Australian Living Legends list in 2004. In 2011 she was among 50 prominent Australians invited by Her Excellency, the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce to lunch with the Queen.

In 2015, Catherine received the Australian Medical Association's President's Award. In 2017, a Sydney Ferries Emerald-class ferry was named the 'Catherine Hamlin' after thousands of Australian supporters voted for her. In 2018 she was named New South Wales Senior Australian of the Year.





Reg and Catherine doing their daily rounds.

Despite all these tributes, Catherine was always extremely humbled by all the media attention and awards. Drawing on the courage of Ethiopian women is what inspired her to accept such accolades, and awards were always an opportunity to promote the heartbreaking plight of the fistula patients and the needs of the hospitals treating them.

Today, Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia is a healthcare network of over 550 Ethiopian staff – many trained by Catherine – servicing six hospitals, Desta Mender rehabilitation centre, the Hamlin College of Midwives and 80 Hamlin supported Midwifery Clinics. Hamlin is the reference organisation and leader in the fight to eradicate obstetric fistula around the world, blazing a trail for holistic treatment and care that empowers women to reassert their humanity, secure their health and well-being, and regain their roles in their families and communities.

At 60th anniversary celebrations in 2019, Catherine said “I love Ethiopia and I have loved every day here. Ethiopia is my home.”

A woman of profound Christian faith, Dr Hamlin said in her biography

*The Hospital by the River:* “I have sometimes been asked if these tragic cases ever test my faith. I can truly say that, if anything, my faith has been strengthened and my soul more firmly anchored to Jesus as the only one to whom we can turn. Jesus never promised us a smooth or trouble-free passage through life. He did promise to be with us to share the sorrow and the pain. The joy I receive from working for these patients is something for which I thank God every day. This has been my experience and I know this is what Reg felt too. I am sure that Reg and I were led here. At the time I did not know it, but in the end, this is the place where we were meant to be. It hasn’t really affected my faith. In fact, if anything, it has strengthened my faith to know that we are doing something that is in His will and the wonderful thing is that it is so enjoyable.”

Reg and Catherine took as their inspiration a verse from the gospel of Matthew; chapter 25 verse 40:



‘...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’. The verse is below Dr Reg Hamlin’s photo which hangs in the hospital.

“Dr Catherine Hamlin’s dedication of her medical skills to the relief of the suffering of those least able to help themselves and her firm quiet confidence in God’s overarching blessing and provision is seen in the establishment of the Addis Abba Fistula Hospital. Truly an outstanding example of Christian compassion in action.” said the Chair of Hamlin Fistula Australia, Dr Robert Tong AM.

Catherine has now been buried alongside Reg in the British War Graves Cemetery in Addis Ababa.

As we mourn her passing, we give thanks for her life, and pray that her work may continue to prosper.



“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.”



**T**his famous quote from Dr Hamlin takes on new significance now that she is no longer with us.

Now is the time to come together to see Dr Hamlin’s greatest desire – the eradication of fistula in Ethiopia – to be realised.

We are blessed with many, many supporters whose generosity over the years has seen the Hamlin Fistula Hospital, Desta Mender and the College of Midwives come into being, and then grow to become flagship entities not only in Ethiopia, but in all of Africa.

Let us not stop now.

Please donate whatever you can to keep Dr Hamlin’s legacy alive.

Please consider leaving a bequest in your will. The two new buildings at the hospital are the result of one single generous bequest. Dr Hamlin was able to see those buildings completed before her death.

**For more information on leaving a bequest please contact the office on (02) 8007 7435 or emailus@hamlinfistula.or.au.**

**You can also write to:  
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