

# HEALING HANDS

In 1962, Mamitu Gashe suffered horrendous injuries during childbirth. But she went on to dedicate her life to saving women in Ethiopia who have been through the same experience. **Jane Yettram** reports

**H**aving been married at just 14, Mamitu was 16 years old when she went into labour with her first child. But the baby wouldn't come. After four days, Mamitu fell into unconsciousness. Her baby was stillborn – and Mamitu herself was left with holes torn between her rectum, bladder and birth canal, leaving faeces and urine trickling unstopably from her vagina.

'I imagined I would heal within a few days,' she says. But she didn't.

For three weeks Mamitu lay in a hut, in pain and distress, until her family carried her the many miles from her remote village to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. Luckily, she reached the Princess Tsehai Hospital. Because there she came across Australian gynaecologists Reginald and Catherine Hamlin, who operated on her injuries – and gave her a future full of love and support, as well as the opportunity to help others like her.

## OBSTETRIC FISTULA

Mamitu's obstructed labour – common in undernourished young girls with underdeveloped pelvises – had caused her injuries, known as an obstetric fistula. This still occurs frequently in developing countries, including Ethiopia, where 85% of births are unattended by a doctor or midwife, 25% of women die from pregnancy-related complications, and eight per cent die from an obstructed labour like Mamitu's.

In developed countries like the UK, the latest medical facilities are on hand to deliver babies and prevent fistulas when mothers face complications. But in Ethiopia, lack of medical care and facilities, as well as the mountainous and inaccessible terrain (75% of the population live, on average, two and a half days' walk from an all-weather road), lead to such devastating outcomes.

Untreated, obstetric fistulas often leave a woman doubly incontinent – leaking waste that causes agonising sores on her skin and a constant appalling smell. And she may well be abandoned, made an outcast or banished to a distant hut because of the stench. The World Health Organization estimates



that more than two million young women live with untreated obstetric fistula in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. But Dr Catherine Hamlin, and her husband, Dr Reg, who died in 1993, dedicated their lives to treating these women – as has Mamitu herself.

## CHANGING LIVES

Surgery can repair the damage to 80-95% of fistulas patients, with most out of bed within a few days and discharged within a couple of weeks. Sadly, Mamitu's injuries were so bad that she was never fully cured, despite many operations. But, back in the 1960s, Dr Catherine and Dr Reg saw immense potential in this young girl who had never been to school and

could neither read nor write. So when they opened their own fistula hospital dedicated to treating women for free, Mamitu was given a job as a nurse aide making beds. She then began helping out during surgeries and, after a couple of years of watching, she was asked by Dr Reg to cut some stitches. Soon, Mamitu started to perform fistula repair and – after carrying out more than 1,000 operations – became one of the world's most experienced fistula surgeons, training gynaecologists from around the world. In 1989, she, Dr Catherine and Dr Reg were all awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal College of Surgeons of Great Britain.

The fistula hospital gave Mamitu a home, a family, a future and the skills to change others' lives. And it has done the same for other women, with 150 fistula patients with ongoing care needs being trained as nurse aides, often by Mamitu, empowering them to give the love and empathy that patients – mainly poor, malnourished, frightened and a long way from their families – need.

Of course, the best way of all to wipe out obstetric fistula is to give women good healthcare, including during pregnancy and labour. And, over the decades, Hamlin Fistula's work has expanded to do just that. Five regional hospitals have been set up across Ethiopia – including, for example, in Bahir Dar, an area of the country where girls are often married as young as seven or eight – with the ability to perform caesarean sections in difficult labours as well as do fistula repair. Each also has a network



Mamitu with Dr Catherine



Patients at the Fistula Hospital

of local clinics, staffed by graduates of Hamlin Fistula's own midwifery college, which was set up to train midwives to provide antenatal and delivery care.

## WORLD-CLASS SURGEON

Mamitu, now 71, has recently retired, but she still lives in the hospital grounds in a tukul, a traditional rondavel-style house. And she is respected by all. In 2009, she was honoured with an award from the Society of Ethiopians Established in Diaspora. It said, 'The society salutes Mamitu as one of the world's premier obstetric fistula surgeons who, despite never having been to medical school and having endured a fistula herself, has enabled countless fellow Ethiopians to live a healthier and longer life.'

In 2014, Dr Catherine celebrated her 90th birthday. At the festivities she called for work to continue to eradicate fistulas completely in Ethiopia, and her son, Richard, stated that his mother 'has one son and 35,000 daughters', summing up Dr Catherine's love and compassion for those she has helped. One of those daughters is Mamitu – who has also dedicated her own life to helping fistula patients. 'She is a very special person who is looked up to and is loved by everyone,' says Dr Catherine. 'She is like the daughter I never had. She is a treasure indeed!'



You can help by knitting blankets for patients

## How you can help too

- **KNIT!** The Hamlin Fistula Hospitals need blankets for patients and clothes for newborn babies. Items can be posted direct to: Hamlin Fistula UK, 4 Parade Buildings, Nimmings Road, Halesowen, West Midlands B62 9JJ. We know that Townswomen have already knitted hundreds – possibly thousands – of blankets, but we have no record of numbers. So if your Guild has knitted items in the past, we'd love you to let us know approximately how many.
- **FUNDRAISE!** Donations help keep the amazing work going – take a look at [www.hamlinfistulauk.org](http://www.hamlinfistulauk.org)
- **SHOP!** At [www.hamlinfistulauk.org](http://www.hamlinfistulauk.org) you can buy merchandise including *The Hospital by the River* and *Catherine's Gift*, which tell Dr Catherine Hamlin's story. And if you register at [www.easyfundraising.org.uk](http://www.easyfundraising.org.uk), choose Hamlin Fistula UK as your charity, and shop through the site with all sorts of retailers from Amazon to John Lewis, the retailer will make a donation every time you buy something online – and it won't cost you a penny extra.



Thousands of women have been treated over the years