

Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

MWIA's president elect, Dr. Clarissa Fabre visited the Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa. It was an inspiring experience. Founded in 1974 by Drs Catherine and Reginald Hamlin, it now has five satellite sites in Ethiopia as well as the main hospital in Addis Ababa. Young girls in rural Ethiopia often marry in their teens, are poorly nourished, have poorly supervised pregnancies, develop obstructed labour, and consequently form fistulae between the vagina and bladder or between the vagina and rectum. They leak urine or feces, they smell, are consequently rejected by their husbands, and become social outcasts. They walk miles to get to medical care. At the Fistula Hospital, they are strengthened and nourished, their fistulas are repaired, and they are rehabilitated. Some of them become nursing assistants when they are well again, and help with the care of future patients. It is astonishing that around 4000 patients with fistulae are still treated each year (the phenomenon is virtually unknown in high income countries). The problem is poor access to medical care in labour, and especially access to Caesarian sections if indicated (in rural communities 90% of births are outside a healthcare facility). The Hamlin Fistula Hospital now trains 20 midwives each year on a four year degree course. The midwives come from these poor rural communities and will return there once their course is completed. All treatment for these girls is free of charge. They arrive at the hospital as social outcasts after days of walking. Once their treatment is complete, each girl is discharged with a clean new dress and a bus ticket home. What a transformation!

The Hamlin Fistula Hospital is a wonderful oasis of medical care. It is set among trees and flowers, the staff are dedicated to holistic care. Dr Catherine Hamlin is now 93 years old (her husband died over 20 years ago) and she lives on site. She is known as "the mother of all mothers" and has created a unique centre of excellent medical care, combined with a loving and caring environment. MWIA fully commends the work of the Fistula Hospital and will cooperate in any way that it can.