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Hope for a family: Miskiya's story



Obstetric fistula can devastate the chances of a woman having marriage and children in the future. Marriages are often broken by the tragedy of losing a first baby in childbirth. With no foreseeable prospects of physical recovery, women are often abandoned by their husbands. Miskiya and Nejat are a story of hope.

Miskiya and her husband Nejat farm in a remote Harar community three hours walking distance from the nearest small town. Together, they work hard to provide all the food they will need for the next year.

Miskiya and Nejat were devastated after the stillborn birth of their first baby. After two days of labouring at home with a traditional birth attendant and unable to push anymore, the unconscious Miskiya was taken to the closest clinic. Not only did their baby die, but she woke up incontinent, with urine draining freely down her legs because of an obstetric fistula injury.

After three months, Nejat brought her to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital where she had surgery to repair the fistula. Unfortunately, once home again, she began dripping urine again while she slept. Day to day life was difficult, and Miskiya isolated herself from the other villagers.

Two years later, pregnant again, she came to the Hamlin Harar Hospital for a caesarean, where the doctors discovered she was still incontinent. After delivering her healthy baby boy by caesarean, they

then surgically treated her fistula again, curing her forever.

"I didn't think that the incontinence would be repaired. My aim was to protect myself from any further severe damage, as I was told by the staff at Addis Ababa. It was like a surprise for me and my husband who had been with me in all those hard days," Miskiya recalls.

Five years later, Miskiya, Nejat and their five-year old son are back at Hamlin Harar Hospital for the caesarean birth of their next baby. Their son has been nicknamed 'the Hamlin's son' by all her family.

Unlike many husbands who abandon their wives with fistula injuries, Nejat has been by her side feeling her pain and trying every possible way to seek a cure from her dreadful injury.

"I now feel as if we had got sick together and cured together. I used to wash her clothes, serve her with food and do what men shouldn't do in our community, to let my wife feel she isn't alone. You did a marvellous job for women like my wife for free, bringing them to their dignity with a motherly care and support that they might not get even from family. May Allah bless you all," remembers Nejat.

"I have no words to thank the staff here than praying the Almighty pays them multiple for their generosity to us," Miskiya says.

An unsung Kiwi hero

Thirty years on, we remember Dr Reg



If ever there was an unsung Kiwi hero, it was Dr Reg Hamlin. His impact on obstetric fistula care would spread far and wide and change the lives of tens of thousands of women.

His journey began in 1908 in Napier, New Zealand. As a boy, he won a scholarship to the Cathedral Grammar School and sang as lead soprano chorister in The Christchurch Cathedral Choir, continuing his education as a teacher and eventually studying Master of Arts in History at the University of Canterbury. His dream of becoming a doctor came to fruition after he qualified in medicine in 1941 from the Otago Medical School, followed by positions as house surgeon at Christchurch Hospital and surgeon for the New Zealand Navy ship Gambia.

The beginning of the Hamlin's legacy

Dr Reg met Dr Catherine Nicholson while working at Crown's street Women's Hospital in Sydney as medical superintendent. He interviewed Dr Catherine for a position at the hospital, and she became a resident in gynaecology and obstetrics.

Upon accepting the resident job, Catherine's mother had asked Reg, Crown Street's medical superintendent, to take good care of Catherine while she worked at the hospital. Reg had assured, with a wry chuckle, that she would be in safe hands. After working side by side with Reg for a year, Catherine realised she was attracted to him - and that the feeling was mutual. Even though Reg was 15 years older than her, age was not a significant factor for Catherine.

Catherine and Reg's story, told in the book *Hospital by the River*, is one defined by their love for one another and their passion to help the most vulnerable women. For Catherine, their personal and professional lives coalesced easily: "being married changed nothing... we still worked as hard as ever, only now we were a team in more than just a professional sense."

Between 1952 and 1956, Dr Reg and Dr Catherine travelled the world to fulfil their dreams as obstetricians. The family of 2 became a family of 3 after Catherine gave birth to their only son Richard. Feeling restless, the couple were eager to help people in need, especially those in the developing parts of the world. The Lancet Medical Journal advertised several positions, but one stood out for both doctors.

In 1959, Dr Reg and Dr Catherine decided to take up the opportunity to teach midwifery for three years in Ethiopia. Warned by a medical colleague that "the fistula patients will break your heart," both doctors began to address the immense needs of childbearing mothers in Ethiopia.

Their experiences in Ethiopia gave the doctors the drive to dedicate their work to the women suffering from obstetric fistula. Unwilling to leave the fistula patients behind, both doctors worked tirelessly to ensure the treatment and recovery of their patients. Three years came and passed and became a lifetime. And in 1974, the Hamlins opened the first dedicated fistula hospital in Addis Ababa, built with New Zealand aid money.

The Hamlins fought to ensure that every woman deserves to birth safely and with dignity. Working diligently to create and perfect surgical techniques for complex fistula injuries, they treated over 20,000 cases of obstetric fistula by the year 2000. Now with 6 hospitals, Hamlin Fistula has transformed the lives of over 65,000 women.

Dr Reg was renowned for the compassion and respect with which he treated the fistula patients. Much to their joy, he would do a little dance with them to celebrate before they would return home after treatment.

In 1965 Queen Elizabeth presented Dr Reg the Officer of the Order of the British Empire.

Still working in his 80s, Dr Reg's health gradually declined due to a reoccurring fibrous sarcoma that began in 1991. This did not stop him; Dr Reg continued to work for Hamlin Fistula until the 5th of August 1993, the day he passed away. Drawing courage from family and friends, Dr Catherine continued to lead Hamlin Fistula, building the organisation into what it is today.

**A mother is a family's
richest possession,
a being of
priceless value.**

Reg Hamlin

Q & A with Behailu

A Hamlin patient identification officer



In 2020, Hamlin Fistula Ethiopia and UNFPA Ethiopia formed a partnership to combine efforts to improve maternal health outcomes for Ethiopian women living with untreated obstetric fistula injuries.

This three-year joint project focuses on improving access to fistula care for Ethiopian women, as well as reaching more women for screening and referral of cervical cancer. The Patient Identification Program is a key part of finding the estimated 31,000 women living hidden with fistula injuries.

Since the project was launched in September 2019, 996 women have been identified and treated.

Behailu is one of the Hamlin Patient Identification Officers. We chatted to him about what being a Patient Identification Officer involves.



Q & A with Behailu:

How important is the identification program?

It is an essential program. Over the last two years, we have identified many women with fistulas in the community, many of whom live in remote areas.

How long have you been working as a patient identification officer?

I have been in this role since September 2017.

What is your role as an identification officer?

My primary responsibilities are finding patients in the community and screening them. I also provide patients with education on maternity issues. If people find suspected fistula cases in their community, they call us, and we help bring them to treatment centres.

We also do community awareness campaigns at the market and partner with the government and some local non-government organisations.

How far do you travel?

Very far, sometimes we travel around 600 to 700kms.

For example, if we travel to South Omeo or other regions from here, it is about 600kms. Our catchment is vast, and we are trying to catch all the areas.

What tools do you use?

We use microphones in the community, and sometimes we use an ambulance with loudspeakers, allowing us to do a large community outreach.

Are houses accessible or do you have to walk to reach communities?

Some areas are challenging to travel by car, we try to travel some distance by motorbike and sometimes by walking.

Any messages for supporters?

I want to thank our donors. All this is made possible by our donors. Please keep it up.

Donate before March 31 to claim your 2023 tax rebate

Did you know that Kiwis can claim back their tax rebate when they donate to Hamlin Fistula New Zealand? When you give to Hamlin Fistula New Zealand, you can claim back 33% of your gift over \$5 as a tax rebate. Charity number CC26896

Are you up to taking the Hamlin 2023 Barefoot Challenge?

When a woman suffering with a fistula hears about the work of Hamlin Fistula, they are usually located in some of the most remote parts of Ethiopia and have to endure a laborious trek to get to the nearest hospital. For most, this will mean many kilometres of walking, usually barefoot.

This year, Hamlin are challenging you to complete your own barefoot journey while raising funds for these courageous women.

The challenge will run over the month of May, ending on May 23rd - The International Day to End Obstetric Fistula.

Get Inspired

Check out our page www.hamlinfistula.org.nz/stories of amazing stories of women with fistula whose lives have been transformed by Hamlin. Often these women undertake a long and arduous journey in rural Ethiopia to make their way to the Hamlin Fistula hospital in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

Read about our inspiring participants from 2022, whether it's an 11-year-old girl up a mountain, a group of friends' amazing fundraising success on the beach or a couple on an arduous 11-hour trek!

Contact Hamlin by registering your interest, and we will help you create your very own fundraising webpage so that your friends can follow your progress.

Get Active

Using the resilience shown by these remarkable women as an incentive, you and your friends can commit to your own trek, raising funds for fistula patients as you go. Challenge yourself by pledging to commit to walking to your own challenge! You can make it as simple or creative as you like. It could be a barefoot walk by the river or in the park, barefoot mufti at school, or a day barefoot in the office! You decide what suits you.

Ready to take on the challenge?

Pick a date for your challenge between May 1 - May 23, International Day to End Obstetric Fistula.

Go to www.hamlinfistula.org.nz/barefootchallenge to get started.

Inspired but not able to participate?

You can still show your support and encourage others by getting in behind one of our teams. You can donate to a team's challenge by checking out the teams on our task bar www.hamlinfistula.org.nz/barefoot-challenge

Register your interest: To speak to a member of the Hamlin Team, go to www.hamlinfistula.org.nz/barefoot-challenge or email info@hamlinfistula.org.nz

