

This condition makes her an outcast from society, rejected by her husband and family because of her objectionable smell and often relegated to a shed well away from everyone. She may suffer quietly for months, years or even decades before becoming aware of the help and treatment available at one of the five Hamlin Fistula Hospitals spread around Ethiopia. Her biggest challenge is to get herself to one of these places for the life-changing operation.

The Hamlin Hospital's fistula surgery achieves a success rate of more than 93 per cent. However, a small percentage of patients cannot be completely cured and require catheters and ongoing medical monitoring.

They receive this at the "Village of Joy" or Desta Mender, a self-help village near Addis Ababa, where the women learn to grow food and maintain an independent life.

I ask Catherine what her wish for the future might be. "Oh that's easy," she says, smiling, "To close the fistula clinics and turn them into ordinary hospitals because we don't need to treat these fistulas any more." On this note we say our farewells.

As my taxi passes through the gates and turns left towards Addis Ababa, I reflect on the remarkable work of this Australian doctor who has put her heart and soul into Ethiopia for the past 50 years. I am happy knowing that AusAID is helping these women get their lives back.



ABOVE: Dr Catherine Hamlin with trainee midwives.  
Photo: Lucy Horodny

# The birth of midwives

The Hamlin College of Midwives will make a huge difference to women's health in Ethiopia, writes Lucy Horodny.



Honorary Dean Annette Bennett is a driving force behind the Hamlin College of Midwives plan.  
Photo: Lucy Horodny

In Sweden, the government put a midwife in every town in 1876 and halved the maternal death rate within six months.

In New York, the world's first fistula hospital closed its doors in 1895 due to lack of need.

In England, fistulas were eradicated by 1920.

In developing countries today, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that two million women suffer from untreated fistula and another 100,000 develop the condition each year.

In Ethiopia, 94 per cent of births occur in the home without any medical care. Often the women have undersized pelvises due to hard work and a lack of calories and so have difficulty delivering a baby normally. With few clinics and midwives, over 80 languages, poor

transport systems, a wet season that impedes all transport and communities unconvinced of the benefits of midwives and clinics, the risk of death and fistulas for women in childbirth is enormous.

According to Annette Bennett, Dean of the Hamlin College of Midwives, training and deploying midwives will make a significant difference to the health and survival of mothers and babies in Ethiopia.

## A comprehensive plan

WHO estimates that globally around 6 million mothers, newborns and children die each year.

The pioneering work of two Australian doctors, Catherine and Reg Hamlin, over the past 50 years has culminated in a comprehensive plan to provide trained midwives across the Ethiopian countryside.

Implementing the plan will significantly reduce the number of women who die in childbirth in Ethiopia. This directly supports Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 3, 4 and 5 of promoting gender equality, reducing child mortality and improving maternal health, and is part of Australia's commitment to helping Africa achieve the MDGs.

## Five mini-fistula hospitals and 25 clinics

Currently, the Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa is supported by four regional mini-fistula hospitals, with a fifth one due to open in 2009.

By September 2010 the first intake of midwives will be deployed into the regional clinics. The plan is to build 25 midwife clinics, with five clinics located within a 60 kilometre radius of each hospital.

In choosing sites for the 25 clinics, the College is consulting with regional health officers to identify areas of greatest need. The selection team test drives the roads from the clinic to the hospital to check roadworthiness and the time taken in an emergency. Where roads are not suitable for an ambulance, other transport options such as trolleys on the back of motorbikes are being investigated.

Each hospital will act as a base for supervision and support for its five clinics. The clinics will be equipped with a standard birthing kit, a satellite phone and an ambulance for emergency deliveries.

Performance of the clinics and patient statistics will be monitored and fed back into continual improvements.

## Recruitment

Currently, the College has 25 students and expects an intake of 20 per year in the future, with capacity for a total of 60 at any one time.

The college actively recruits Year 12 science students from around each regional fistula hospital. These students are familiar with the local languages

and villages. They have very good English skills, necessary because they will rely heavily on English text books.

The young women are interviewed and tested regarding their suitability for the work.

## Midwife training

The Hamlin College of Midwives was established in 2007. It offers a three-year Bachelor in Midwifery degree that is accredited by the Ministry of Education and part of WHO's internationally-recognised competencies. The first group of students will graduate in September 2010.

Students learn to assess medical conditions, growth rates and foetal position and when to intervene to reposition the baby or give medication during a pregnancy, often preventing the need for a doctor's intervention. They study sociology, psychology, infection control, pharmacology, paediatrics, emergency care and birthing repair.

The degree equips the students with the skills to assist a normal delivery. In the event of complications they are trained to recognise the need for urgent medical attention and get the patient to hospital.

## Upon graduation

After completing their degree, the midwives will be deployed in pairs to the antenatal centres in their home regions where their knowledge of the local people means their work is more likely to be trusted and accepted.

Many previous attempts at deploying midwives around Ethiopia have failed due to lack of mentoring, lack of colleague support, lack of equipment and supplies, poor match of language used in the area and inadequate pay to encourage ongoing interest in the work.

A critical factor in ensuring success is training and development for medical staff to keep up with the latest technologies and evidence-based practices. This typifies the modern approach taken by the College to ensure success.

## The right person in the right place

The deployment strategy is thorough and exhaustive. It involves choosing the right person from a community and locating them in the appropriate community—their own.

In most developing countries, births are attended by traditional birthing assistants (TBAs) who don't have the medical training to handle emergencies. The Hamlin strategy involves the graduate midwives working alongside the TBAs and imparting some of their knowledge to them over time. This is designed to increase community acceptance of the midwives and the new medical approach to birthing. It is envisaged that reduced death rates will progressively move the community towards increased trust in midwives.



## Lighting a candle

*Lighting a candle* is a new AusAID-funded documentary due to be screened in Australia in September 2009. It highlights the visionary work in Ethiopia of two Australian doctors—Dr Catherine Hamlin and her late husband Dr Reg Hamlin. Their 50-year vision has created the Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa, five regional mini-hospitals, the Hamlin College of Midwives and the Desta Mender self-help rural village.

Australia has supported the Hamlin Fistula Hospital in Addis Ababa since 1984 and helped to extend its services to rural locations. In January 2009, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Stephen Smith announced additional funding of \$2.3 million to expand the Hamlin College of Midwives and support 25 rural maternal health clinics in Ethiopia. By 2010, the college expects to train and deploy about 20 midwives per year with a total student body of 60 midwives at any one time.

ABOVE: Fistula Hospital nurse. Photo: Kate Holt, AusAID