



Dining for Women

## Program Fact Sheet: February 2008

### Featured Program: The Fistula Foundation

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**Web Site:** <http://www.fistulafoundation.org/>

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**Mission: The Fistula Foundation** is dedicated to treating and preventing childbirth injury obstetric fistula through the support of the Hamlin Fistula Hospitals in Ethiopia.

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**What is an Obstetric Fistula?** A fistula is a hole. An obstetric fistula of the kind that occurs in Ethiopia (and many other developing countries) is a hole between a woman's birth passage and one or more of her internal organs. This hole develops over many days of obstructed labor, when the pressure of the baby's head against the mother's pelvis cuts off blood supply to delicate tissues in the region. The dead tissue falls away and the woman is left with a hole between her vagina and her bladder (called a vesicovaginal fistula or VVF) and sometimes between her vagina and rectum (rectovaginal fistula, RVF). This hole results in permanent incontinence of urine and/or feces. A majority of women who develop fistulas are abandoned by their husbands and ostracized by their communities because of their inability to have children and their foul smell.

The World Health Organization estimates that approximately 2 million women have untreated fistula and that approximately 100,000 women develop fistula each year, though some estimates put the number closer to 500,000. Because fistula affects women in the most remote regions of the world, an accurate count is very hard to achieve.

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**Who the Fistula Hospital Serves:** Experts at the Hamlin Fistula Hospitals estimate that there are approximately 9,000 new cases of fistula every year in Ethiopia alone. Because most fistula sufferers are young women—many still in their teens—they are likely to live with their condition for upwards of 25 years.

By any estimate, there are at least two million women currently living with fistula throughout the developing world. The world capacity to treat fistula is estimated at 6,500 fistula repair surgeries per year.

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**History of the Fistula Hospital and *The Fistula Foundation*:** In the late 1950s, two young doctors, Reginald and Catherine Hamlin, were dedicated obstetricians living and working in Australia. Early in their careers, the couple practiced gynecology in Sydney, but they were eager to seek out and aid the women who needed them most.

They got their chance in 1959, when they were called upon to come to Ethiopia and set up practice in a hospital in the capital city of Addis Ababa. When they arrived, Reginald and Catherine discovered a very poor country with almost no resources for expectant mothers and they learned about obstetric fistulas. The Hamlins perfected a surgical technique to mend the obstetric fistula injuries, while continuing to treat a broad range of obstetric cases. In their first year in Ethiopia, the Hamlins treated 30 fistula patients.

The Hamlins quickly became aware of the suffering endured by women with fistulas, who are usually shunned so severely due to their odor that even other patients refuse to be near them. They worked for more than a decade to establish a fistula hospital. In 1974, the Hamlins opened the doors of Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital. It remains the only medical center in the world dedicated exclusively to fistula repair.

Reginald Hamlin worked diligently at Fistula Hospital until his death in 1993. Catherine Hamlin, now 82 years old, has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, and the list of her humanitarian awards is impressive. Dr. Hamlin continues to oversee the work of the hospital and can frequently be found in the operating room performing the delicate fistula repair surgery she pioneered more than 40 years ago.

Recently, the Fistula Hospital has initiated an expansion project to build five mini-fistula hospitals throughout Ethiopia and to provide advanced medical training for senior surgeons. Each of the mini-hospitals is expected to treat approximately 400 patients per year.

**The Fistula Foundation** was founded in 2000 after Richard Haas and his daughter, Shaleece, visited the Fistula Hospital and were moved by the oasis of healing created by Dr. Catherine Hamlin and her late husband. They returned to California and established a US-based non-profit dedicated to supporting the treatment and prevention activities of the Fistula Hospital. Notable public awareness efforts include:

- In 2003 and 2005, a highly praised New York Times Op-Ed by Pulitzer Prize winning author, Nicholas Kristof, lauded the work of Dr. Hamlin.
- In January 2004, the Oprah Winfrey Show invited Dr. Hamlin to speak about the plight of fistula patients in Ethiopia. In the first six weeks after her appearance on the show, over 6,000 donors contributed \$1.3 million through the Fistula Foundation to Dr. Hamlin's cause.
- In December 2005, the Oprah Winfrey Show aired another show featuring Ms. Winfrey's visit to the Hospital, titled "Oprah goes to Ethiopia".
- The feature-length documentary *A Walk To Beautiful* is set to air on the award winning PBS show NOVA on April 1, 2008.

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**How The Fistula Hospital Works:** Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital provides poor women suffering from obstetric fistula with free, specialized medical care. The Fistula Hospital estimates that it costs \$450 to provide one woman with a fistula repair operation, high-quality postoperative care, a new dress, and bus fare home.

An obstetric fistula can be closed with intravaginal surgery. If the surgery is performed by a skilled surgeon, a fistula patient has a good chance of returning to a normal life with full control of her bodily functions. The Fistula Hospital enjoys a success rate of greater than 90%.

For many years the doctors and nurses of Fistula Hospital have been traveling to regional hospitals to operate on fistula victims who cannot make the journey to Addis Ababa. In order to address the needs of these women, plans were made to open permanent mini-fistula hospitals in five strategic locations; Bahir Dar, Mekele, Harrar, Yirgalem, and Metu. Three mini-hospitals are now in full operation, and the remaining two mini-hospitals are expected to open over the next two years. The mini-fistula hospitals are being built adjacent to existing regional hospitals and will offer a discrete entrance for fistula patients and high-risk women who might otherwise be turned away at the main hospital gates.

Today, all Ethiopian medical students specializing in obstetrics and gynecology are required to train for two months at Fistula Hospital.

On a broader level, Fistula Hospital has developed the model program for fistula treatment worldwide, and has inspired numerous centers throughout the developing world. It is considered the world center for fistula treatment, long-term care, prevention, and training. More than 100 surgeons throughout the developing world have received fistula repair surgery training.

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**Can Fistulas be Prevented?** The root causes of fistula are grinding poverty and the low status of women and girls. In Ethiopia, the poverty and malnutrition in children contributes to the condition of stunting, where the girl skeleton, and therefore pelvis as well, do not fully mature. This stunted condition can contribute to obstructed labor, and therefore fistula.

Any woman who can gain access to emergency obstetric care such as a cesarean section will not develop a fistula.

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**Financial Profile:** The Fistula Foundation operates efficiently with 76% of expenses directed to programs and 24% to administration and fund raising. The Foundation earned the Better Business Bureau's seal standards for Charitable Accountability and a four-star rating from Charity Navigator. In addition, they were named the very top nonprofit on Charity Navigator's list of "10 Charities Expanding in a Hurry".

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**DFW Giving History:** Dining for Women contributed to The Fistula Foundation in our early years, when only the founding Greenville, SC chapter existed.

2004: \$345

2005: \$565

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Source: The Fistula Foundation Web site.