



17 OCT, 2020

MY SAVIOUR, TEACHER AND FRIEND

Daily Telegraph, Sydney

Page 1 of 3



Dr Catherine Hamlin and husband Dr Reg Hamlin (centre) with protege Mamitu Gashe to Reg's right and their team working to help "fistula pilgrims".

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Australian Dr Catherine Hamlin achieved many miracles during her work in Ethiopia but none more astounding than with the patient who became a protege, writes **Sue Williams**

When Dr Catherine Hamlin first met Mamitu Gashe, the tiny 16-year-old girl from a remote village in the highlands of Ethiopia was close to death. She was being carried into hospital by a security guard after her family and friends transported her for 12 hours down the mountainside on a stretcher made of eucalyptus branches and then put her on a bus to the capital Addis Ababa.

Little Mamitu had suffered an agonising four-day labour with an obstructed birth, her baby had died inside her and she'd sustained terrible internal injuries that left her with no control over her bodily functions. Now, she wanted to die, too.

But Catherine and her husband Reg, who'd left Australia for Ethiopia three years before, fell instantly in love with

the girl. She'd obviously shown tremendous courage in begging her family to bring her to Addis when she'd never even known what a city, or a

hospital, was and they could see the light of intelligence in her eyes, beyond the fear.

"Don't worry, you are safe now," Catherine told Mamitu. "We will take good care of you. We will cure you and you will be able to return to your family and your husband and carry on your life. We will care for you like a daughter."

And the last thing Mamitu remembered was the two doctors – the first white people she'd ever seen and whom she thought in her delirious state



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Page 2 of 3

might really be angels – giving her an injection and then sleeping more deeply than she ever had before.

It was the start of a relationship that was to be the greatest of Catherine's life and endured right up to her death in March this year. Now, it's also being celebrated as one of Catherine's – and Australia's – most valuable legacies to the developing world.

From that fateful day when the two women's lives crossed, Mamitu became the Hamlins' greatest supporter, and aide.

"They saved my life, so I wanted to give back to them," Mamitu says. "They said they would treat me as their daughter, so from the beginning, I called them Emaye (Mother) and Abaye (Father). They were so wonderful to me."

As Mamitu gradually regained her strength, she underwent a series of operations to repair her fistula, where her baby's head during the prolonged labour had torn holes in her bladder and rectum, leaving her with constant leaking.

Fistula is now unknown in the developed world, where we have access to doctors, clinics and procedures like caesareans for difficult births. But in Ethiopia and many other poor countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, where access to doctors and medical services is difficult, it's still a huge problem.

Left with constant leaking and little means to keep themselves clean, fistula's victims become prone to infection, and they are often abandoned by their husbands, and kicked out by their families and villages because of the mess and smell, and left to fend alone.

Catherine, originally from Sydney and Reg, from New Zealand, were shocked by the numbers of what they called "fistula pilgrims" arriving every day in Addis Ababa to seek help. As a result, they studied books on how to repair fistula and then started to operate themselves.

"These were beautiful young women at the start of their lives," says Catherine. "And suddenly, it was all over. It was an absolute tragedy. So we desperately wanted to give them a second chance."

Mamitu watched everything in awe. She knew nothing beyond her little village and had never been to school for a single day. She'd been engaged by her peasant farmer parents at 13 and married at 14 to a man 11 years older she'd never met before, and then gone into labour at 16.

She was so grateful to Catherine and Reg for their care that she started, between operations, helping at the hospital, mopping floors, making beds and reassuring the new frightened young girls who arrived every day. Then she drew up rosters of chores for the other patients too.

When the two doctors decided to set up their own dedicated Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital with the help of donors across Australia and New Zealand, Mamitu worked with them to make the transfer and proved adept at charming the bureaucrats into giving them extra medical supplies.

Soon she was also helping out in the operating theatre and progressed to assisting with operations. She proved so talented and devoted that the doctors then taught her how to operate herself, guiding her hands to show her what to do.

It wasn't long before Mamitu started gaining a reputation as one of the best fistula surgeons in Ethiopia and she was awarded the medical world's highest honour, the Royal College of Surgeons' Gold Medal, along with Catherine and Reg.

Doctors and surgeons from all over the world came to the hospital to meet her and to learn how to perform the surgery from her. Invariably, they were stunned when they discovered she couldn't read or write and had never been to school.

"She was simply astonishing," says legendary British surgeon Sir Ian McColl, who later served as Britain's shadow minister for health. "It was such a privilege to operate with her."

Mamitu also became Catherine's closest friend, consoling her on Reg's death in 1993 and urging her to keep going with her mission to eradicate fistula. Although from such different worlds, the two women were inseparable, with Mamitu nursing Catherine when she grew frailer until her death at the age of 96.

While Catherine's legacy is the

fistula hospital and its teams of doctors, and now the 437 other such hospitals set up around the world, some say her greatest achievement is Mamitu, now 74 but still operating and still teaching others to operate.

"Emaye didn't just give me life; she gave me the opportunity to help others and that is the best gift of all," Mamitu says. "She will never be forgotten. Some day they will make her a saint but she already is in my eyes."

SUE WILLIAMS IS THE AUTHOR OF HEALING LIVES, THE STORY OF A FRIENDSHIP THAT SAVED SO MANY WOMEN'S LIVES, OUT NOW FROM PAN MACMILLAN, \$34.99; THE CATHERINE HAMLIN FISTULA FOUNDATION, HAMLIN.ORG.AU, 9440 7001



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Mamitu Gashe nursed mentor Dr Catherine Hamlin until her death.



Mamitu and Hamlin in the operating theatre.