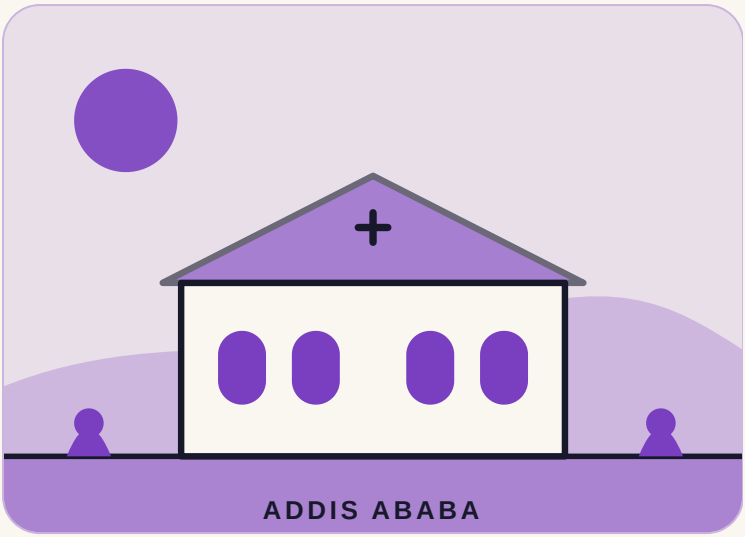

ETHIOPIA

The doctor who stayed for women no one would treat

Catherine Hamlin planned three years in Ethiopia. She stayed for life and gave thousands of women back their health.

WHERE Addis Ababa

WHO Dr Catherine Hamlin, an Australian doctor in Ethiopia

WHEN 1958 to 2020

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Catherine Hamlin was born in Sydney, Australia, in 1924. She grew up as one of six children. She finished medical school at the University of Sydney in 1946. At a Sydney hospital, she met another doctor, Reg Hamlin. They married in 1950.

In the late 1950s, the couple answered an advertisement for doctors at a hospital in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Sources give the year as 1958 or 1959. They planned to stay about three years.

A cruel injury

In Ethiopia, Catherine met women with a terrible injury. It is called obstetric fistula. It comes after a very long, blocked childbirth. The baby is often lost. The mother cannot control her urine.

Many of these women were pushed out by their husbands and villages. Hospitals turned them away. There was no cure on offer.

The Hamlins knew little about it at first. They read medical papers from the 1850s and worked out their own operation. A report says it is still used today.

> **There must be men and women of compassion and determination so that childbirth for all women can always be safe.**
>
> CATHERINE HAMLIN, 2009

60,000	93%	61
women treated by 2020	success rate, says one foundation	years she lived in Ethiopia

A hospital for one injury

The operation worked. One foundation says it succeeded in 93 percent of cases. Women began to arrive from all over Ethiopia. The Hamlins built small hostels where they could wait for surgery.

In 1975, they opened the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital. Some sources say 1974. Treatment there is free.

They added more. A village called Desta Mender, “Village of Joy,” cares for women too badly hurt to go home. Clinics opened in other parts of the country. In 2007, Catherine founded a college to train midwives, so fewer women are hurt in childbirth.

Patients and staff called her Emaye, which means “mother.” In 2009, she won the Right Livelihood Award, an international prize for work that serves people. In 2019, Ethiopia’s prime minister gave her an Eminent Citizen Award.

Catherine died at home in Addis Ababa on 18 March 2020. She was 96.

How it unfolded

- **1958** The Hamlins arrive in Ethiopia (some sources say 1959).
- **1975** The Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital opens (some say 1974).
- **2007** Catherine founds a college for midwives.
- **2009** She wins the Right Livelihood Award.
- **2020** She dies at home in Addis Ababa, aged 96.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Many doctors treat the patients who reach them. She built a place for women that others turned away.

She also trained midwives, to stop the injury before it happens.

OUR TAKE

She stayed for the women everyone else had turned away.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1 Stay when the work finds you

A plan for three years became a life's work.

Try this: Think of a task you meant to do briefly. Ask if it deserves more of your time.

2 Learn from old knowledge

The Hamlins read medical papers from the 1850s to build their operation.

Try this: Read one old book or paper about a problem you face.

3 Help the people others turn away

Hospitals had no cure on offer for these women. The Hamlins built one.

Try this: Notice who gets turned away in your work or town, and offer one small help.

4 Prevent as well as cure

She founded a college to train midwives, so fewer women were hurt.

Try this: Pick a problem you fix often. Write one step that would stop it at the source.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A short plan can become a life's work.

Sources

Right Livelihood Foundation
Catherine Hamlin, 2009 laureate

Women's Agenda
Remembering Dr Catherine Hamlin, the gynaecologist named a 'National Living Treasure' (2020)

Fact-check note: This story rests on two sources that largely agree. Neither is a major newspaper; the big obituaries (The Guardian, The New York Times and others, listed on Wikipedia) were blocked or not found, so I did not read them. Details differ. The Hamlins arrived in 1958 (Women's Agenda) or 1959 (Right Livelihood), so the story says "1958 or 1959". The hospital opened in 1975 (Right Livelihood); other pages I saw only in search results say 1974, which I did not open, so the story says "some sources say 1974". Both sources say about 60,000 women have been treated; a hospital release I saw only in search results says 70,000, so the story uses 60,000. The 93 percent success rate is from Right Livelihood only. The use of 1850s medical papers, the technique still being used, the name "Emaye", the 2007 midwifery college and the 61 years in Ethiopia are from Women's Agenda only. The number of regional clinics is given as five (Right Livelihood, in addition to the main hospital) and six (Women's Agenda), so the story says only that clinics opened in other parts of the country. Both sources draw on material from the Hamlin charity itself. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.