

Dr Elinor Catherine Hamlin AC

The degree of Doctor of Medicine (honoris causa) was conferred upon Dr Elinor Catherine Hamlin AC at a special function on 15 March 2005.



Dr Catherine Hamlin in the Senate Room before the conferral of the honorary degree, *photo, 'The Gazette', April 2005.*



Dr Catherine Hamlin with Pro Chancellor David Hoare, *photo, University of Sydney Alumni Relations.*

Citation

“She is sincere, understanding and lives up to her high ideals. We are sure her good influence will always be widespread”.

These simple lines come from the profile of the young Catherine Nicholson in the Sydney University Faculty of Medicine Senior Year Book of early 1946.

Elinor Catherine Nicholson was educated at Frensham, Sydney Hospital and The University of Sydney. The story of how this extraordinary and devoted gynaecologist brought hope and happiness to tens of thousands of destitute Ethiopian women is now well-known. Their lives had been wrecked by fistulae and consequent incontinence. These fistulae are caused by prolonged labours under primitive African conditions. The babies are dead at birth. The women are deserted by husbands, families, and friends. They remain sterile and childless.

It is a long way from Catherine Nicholson's Sydney city life as a Resident at Crown Street Women's Hospital, then a major Sydney University teaching hospital, where she met and married Dr Reginald Hamlin.

War-time students spent spare moments digging trenches for air-raid shelters round the site of the present Fisher Library and the Year Book records their gratitude to Sir Howard Florey for lectures on the “wonder of our times” – penicillin.

With World War II ended, these students were acutely aware that theirs would be a responsibility for peace, inspired by the sacrifices of their fellows in war.

In 1959 the Hamlins answered an advertisement in ‘The Lancet’ , and went to practise gynaecology at the Princess Tsehai Hospital in Addis Ababa. On their first night a knock on the door heralded a stranger who announced herself as Sylvia Pankhurst. Soon their lives would be intertwined with other great iconic figures of the twentieth century, not least The Emperor Haile Selassie and his family.

They were stunned by the poverty, and unprepared for the scale of the misery caused by patients with ‘incurable’ fistulae. So they began to study, and then to adapt, generally forgotten nineteenth century New York techniques of fistula repair. They also incorporated more recent adaptations of the German gynaecologist, Heinrich Martius.

Modern Germany and the USA have little use for such techniques. But in impoverished Ethiopia, the fistula problem had reached ‘epidemic’ proportions.

News of the Hamlins' fistula cures spread. Soon women were coming by foot from all over Ethiopia. 90% of surgery was successful. In 1974 the Hamlins established a dedicated Fistula Hospital, destined to become a major teaching institution in North Africa. More than 20,000 fistula operations have now been performed there.

And in the middle of all this there were seventeen years of brutal communist rule and insurrection, with the odd bullet landing in Dr Hamlin's living room or on hospital pillows, and the dreaded sight of piles of bodies on the way into town. She secretly supported long-term political prisoners. A number of Catherine Hamlin's friends were executed. It was no mean feat of political savvy that her hospital survived and flourished throughout.

The Hamlins did not simply cure their patients; they cared for them. Every patient is given a new dress before going home. Some patients became their staff. Dr Hamlin recalls the amazement with which the visiting President of the Royal College of Surgeons of London observed a fistula repair operation meticulously performed by a former village girl and one-time patient whom the Hamlins had trained. Many others became nursing aides. And some of the 10% of patients whose fistulae were beyond repair have remained in a home close to the hospital, as part of the extended Hamlin family. Lessons indeed for the west in holistic medicine.

After Reg died in 1993, Catherine Hamlin continued their work , which has received the highest international acclaim.

After reading her book ‘The Hospital by the River’ – co-authored with John Little and re-printed eight times – you realize that it is possible to try to understand Catherine Hamlin's life's journey from at least four perspectives – all in different ways within the proper purview of a university.

At one level it is a history, set in domestic counterpoint against some of the great political movements and battles of the twentieth century. Yet it is a peculiarly feminist history, for women with dire physical injuries are

often forgotten by first world feminists.

At another level it is the application of academic discovery - much of it from journals substantially older than 'last year's Lancet'. It is not always remembered that for necessity successfully to mother invention there must needs be a midwife – a determined and innovative midwife. In Catherine Hamlin and her husband the needy women of North Africa found their 'midwife' – in every sense of that term.

At its most dramatic and poignant level – the level which we honour particularly this evening - it is the use of the gift of medical training in unstinting life-long service to communities less blessed than ours.

And in what I suspect Catherine Hamlin would see as her life's most significant level, it is a multifaceted spiritual journey set on foundations so solidly imparted to her from her Christian missionary family.

Frensham and Sydney University must have got something right.

Chancellor, I have the honour to present Elinor Catherine Hamlin, Companion of the Order of Australia, for the degree of Doctor of Medicine (Honoris Causa).