



THE OPRAH WINFREY SHOW

Real

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Transcript of Dr. Catherine Hamlin of the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital on The Oprah Winfrey Show

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WINFREY: Coming up, a story that will break your heart and make you feel grateful at the same time. Back in a moment.

(Announcements)

You know, we all get so caught up in the stresses of our daily lives that it's hard sometimes to take time and think about what a day would be like for a woman struggling to survive and just get through each day in a Third World country. But when you hear this next story, I hope you'll take a moment to count your own blessings, girls.

(Start videotape)

This terrified 12-year-old girl is being forced into marriage, a common practice in the African country of Ethiopia. If she's like many girls in these small villages, she'll soon be pregnant even though her small and underdeveloped body is not ready to give birth.

Many of these girls, some as young as 13, struggle with labor for days without medical assistance and usually deliver a stillborn. But that is just the beginning of their nightmare, because the trauma of labor rips apart their insides, leaving these girls to drip a constant stream of urine that follows them wherever they go. They develop an internal hole called a fistula. And no matter how hard they try to stay clean, they smell of waste. Most become social outcasts and are abandoned by their husbands, families and villages. Often believing that there is no cure, they're then left to live alone in despair for the rest of their lives.

When Australian gynecologist Dr. Catherine Hamlin first came to Ethiopia, she thought it was for a short trip to help set up a midwifery school, but when she saw these suffering young women, her plans changed.

Dr. HAMLIN: The previous gynecologist had said to us, 'Look, the fistula patients will break your heart. You can't really do anything to help them.' And so we were determined to try to do what we could.

WINFREY: It's estimated that 9,000 young women develop fistulas in Ethiopia every year. Catherine knew a surgery that could cure these girls and restore their dignity.

Dr. HAMLIN (to a young fistula patient): So while you were pushing, pushing and pushing, you pushed a big hole in your bladder. And if you look at this bit of paper, you'll see the big hole. The good news is that we're going to be able to mend it. Just a few stitches and it'll all be mended.

WINFREY: Making it their life's mission to help as many of these girls as possible, Catherine and her late husband moved to Ethiopia and opened the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital, helping thousands of women in the last 30 years. Every morning, desperate girls arrive at the hospital, hoping to be cured. Most of them travel for days to meet with this compassionate healer that many call St. Catherine. She insists that nobody is turned away and treatment is free.

Dr. HAMLIN: We try to admit as many as we can at once because they've made a journey from the country. Often, they've had to sell an animal, a cow or a sheep to make the bus fare, or they've even just begged.

WINFREY: After treatment, every girl leaves the hospital wearing a new dress. Catherine wants to make their return home special.

Dr. HAMLIN: We give them this new dress to make them feel they're starting a new life. It's very important for their morale to make them feel they're going back to a fresh start.

(To healed fistula patients) Now we're very excited to see you all going home looking so beautiful in your lovely new dresses. When you get home, everyone will come out and there will be a great feast. There'll be dancing, and everyone will be happy.

(End videotape)

WINFREY: Please welcome Dr. Catherine Hamlin. It's wonderful to see you.

Dr. HAMLIN: Thank you.

WINFREY: Good to see you.

Dr. HAMLIN: Thank you very much for asking me.

WINFREY: Thank you, Dr. Hamlin. This is Lisa Ling. Have a seat.

We will talk to Dr. Hamlin as soon as we come back. And we'll hear the story of this woman who lived alone in a hut for years. We'll be right back.

(Announcements)

WINFREY: Australian gynecologist Dr. Catherine Hamlin has devoted her life to helping girls and women in Africa whose bodies have been ripped apart by childbirth. Without medical help, their injuries never heal, which makes them drip a constant stream of urine and waste. They're labeled as social outcasts, and most live alone because of their foul odor. Dr. Hamlin's clinic travels to remote villages to help women who have no idea that there is a cure for this devastating problem. On this visit, they find Marjo sitting alone in her hut.

Translator: How old are you?

MARJO (Through Translator): I think 20-something.

Translator: How many children have you had?

MARJO (Through Translator): Six.

Translator: How many of them are alive?

MARJO (Through Translator): One. The rest all died.

Translator: We can do an operation and mend the hole completely. Then you can be a normal person again. You can sit with the people without any smell. Would you like that?

MARJO (Through Translator): I would be so happy to visit people again. (Crying)

WINFREY: Next, they meet Hawa.

HAWA (Through Translator): The problem began after I was in labor for six days.

Translator: Was the child born alive?

HAWA (Through Translator): No, he was dead. It's difficult. I can't hold my head up. I'm frightened. There's nothing I can do about it.

WINFREY: Hawa and Marjo are treated the next day, and their surgeries went well.

One of Catherine's great success stories is Mametu Goshe. She came to the hospital when she was only 16 and has been there ever since. Now in her 50s, Mametu is a skilled surgeon and has cured hundreds of patients in the last 30 years. Mametu wanted to thank Catherine for saving her life, so she recorded this special message for her.

(Tape recording)

Ms. MAMETU GOSHE: I want to thank you, Dr. Hamlin. You changed my life. You are a wonderful woman. When I am thinking about you, it makes me cry. You are like a mother to me. I am missing you so much. Come home soon.

WINFREY: This is Dr. Catherine Hamlin, and she's a woman that we thought you needed to know about, because she has spent nearly 50 years of her career helping these very young women in Africa be reintegrated into society because they become outcasts and, as the woman we saw, live alone, are shunned by their families because there's this foul odor, and nobody knew -- until you came along -- that there was a cure for it. So congratulations to you. God bless you and all your work.

Dr. HAMLIN: Thank you, Oprah, very much.

WINFREY: God bless you for the work that you do. We noticed in the tape that the girls are so young. They're beautiful and so young.

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. Girls in Ethiopia, especially the north of the country, do marry early.

WINFREY: What is early?

Dr. HAMLIN: Well, they might be betrothed at eight or nine, but they don't go to their husbands -- they don't have sexual contact with their husbands -- until puberty, but they often go to live with the in-laws when they're young.

WINFREY: Like eight or nine?

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. They might be taken from their mother and father and taken to the in-laws' house.

WINFREY: So that's why earlier in the tape we saw this 12-year-old girl. They're, they're...

Dr. HAMLIN: Crying, yes.

WINFREY: ...through puberty, even when they just start to become pubescent, they are having children, and their little bodies aren't ready for it.

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes.

WINFREY: And is that part of the problem, because they're too young and they push...

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes.

WINFREY: ...and they push, push and they create these holes.

Dr. HAMLIN: This is because -- the two great causes of obstructed labor are small pelvis or a malposition of the baby inside the mother's uterus. In Ethiopia, she can't get any help. She's got nobody in the village, no ante-natal care, no midwife to help her, no -- nothing.

WINFREY: No epidural.

Dr. HAMLIN: Nothing.

WINFREY: Nothing.

And so -- so when the woman says she's in labor for six days, she means she is in *labor* for *six days*!

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. Imagine a little girl living in a hut in the country away from any main road; she's looking forward to having her first baby, she's one of the unfortunate five percent of all

women in the world that get into obstructed labor -- whether you live in America, Europe, Africa, she's one of the five percent that gets stuck. She doesn't know when she starts her labor nor do the village women know. They encourage her day after day after day. After five days, she delivers a stillborn baby. The only reason she can deliver is because the baby inside the mother gets smaller when it's dead and she can push it out as a dead baby. And she thinks, 'Well, never mind, I've got the baby out. Maybe next year I'll have a live baby,' but she wakes up to a worse horror, finding her bed soaked in urine and sometimes bowel contents as well. And day after day, this continues.

WINFREY: And that's because all of that pushing has created that hole.

Dr. HAMLIN: A hole.

WINFREY: Yeah.

Dr. HAMLIN: A fistula is just a hole between an internal organ and the outside world. The internal organ is the bladder or the rectum and the outside world is the birth passage. So everything is coming out without any control.

WINFREY: So she wakes up, bed covered in urine or waste...

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes.

WINFREY: ...and that just continues because that hole is always there.

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. And she thinks maybe in a day or two it'll dry up. She lies curled up in bed thinking, 'Well, perhaps tomorrow it'll stop.' Her husband comes home from the fields. He's a farmer boy. 'Why is the house smelling like this?' She says, 'I don't know, but I can't control my urine.' And day after day, this goes on. Finally he says, 'I can't stand this smell. I'm going to give you back to your mother and father.' Her mother and father love her. She struggles home, and they run and put their arms around her and hug her, and then they find out that she's smelling. None of the neighbors will come to the house and the father says, 'Let us build a little house for her to live in, a little room somewhere on our family plot.' So they put her into a shed, and there she will stay for the rest of her life unless she can be cured. She's ruined. A beautiful girl of 16, 17, early 20s with no hope of being cured unless she can get some doctor to mend her.

WINFREY: Isn't it true that often these women, when they come to you -- we were seeing on the tape -- they walk for days to get to you.

Dr. HAMLIN: Certainly.

WINFREY: And had to sell whatever they had?

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. They're poor.

WINFREY: The family sells the cow or...

Dr. HAMLIN: Poverty is an enormous factor in the formation of the fistula. They are so poor, they have no hope of making a journey in a bus even unless the father will sell something or the young brother will go to the market and sell a goat or a cow or a sheep to raise the money for the bus, and then she may have two days' walk to get to a main road, and then the bus will pass and she'll get on the bus. And then the busman says, 'You're smelling,' or the other passengers say, 'You're smelling. Get off.' Two of them we had once that sat on a tin at the back of the bus hoping the urine would drip into the tin so they wouldn't be noticed. So their problems are enormous.

WINFREY: And how is it that you turn no woman away ever?

Dr. HAMLIN: We treat them all freely because they're poor. They've got nothing.

WINFREY: And how are you funded?

Dr. HAMLIN: We beg.

WINFREY: You beg.

Dr. HAMLIN: My husband used to say we're professional beggars.

WINFREY: And so you begged your way to helping 24,000 women. What do they call you?

Dr. HAMLIN: They call me mother usually.

WINFREY: They call you mother, yes.

Dr. HAMLIN: And I don't know -- they're so grateful. We're not patching up old people for a few more years. We're giving a young, beautiful woman a new life, and this is why I stay in Ethiopia. I love them. And just -- you'd love them, too, if you could see them. They're beautiful women, and they're so appealing. They've lost everything. They've got shame. They come through the gate with their heads down, and they're so pleased to meet other girls with the same condition.

I had one woman, she was hiding in a monastery for 14 years. She came into the ward, and she said, 'Why, the whole world is here,' she was so excited that there were other women with the same condition. And this is why it's so important to nurse fistula patients in a special ward or a special hospital ideally...

WINFREY: Because...

Dr. HAMLIN: ...because the others -- the other patients who are not fistulas -- will despise them.

WINFREY: Because of the smell?

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. They will even be turned away sometimes by the guard at the gate. They're in rags. Their clothes are soaked in urine. They've got nothing except faith and hope and urine-soaked clothes. And to turn them away is so common in a general hospital. That's why we built our hospital.

WINFREY: I heard you were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for this work.

Dr. HAMLIN: I was, but I didn't get it.

(Laughter.)

WINFREY: Well, I believe that this is God's work on Earth what you're doing.

Dr. HAMLIN: I believe that God has put me there. I know that God is following these girls. He loves them. And I trust in God for the future. I'm old. I'm nearly 80, and I've got to think of the future. Ethiopia is a very poor country.

WINFREY: Yeah.

Dr. HAMLIN: It's a beautiful country. But in 20, 30, 40 years...

WINFREY: And the people there are so beautiful...

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes.

WINFREY: ...I mean, physically beautiful, just gorgeous.

Dr. HAMLIN: But there will still be fistulas there when I'm gone, for many, many years, and this is why I want to be sure -- this is why I'm talking to you -- to make the American public aware that this problem is going on. Because it's a women's issue, nobody's done anything about it.

WINFREY: Right.

Dr. HAMLIN: If men were getting fistulas, something would have been done years and years ago, I think.

WINFREY: If a man had a hole in his penis, you're darn right about that. I mean, all the men would rise up -- even the men here know that, don't you think? If there was a problem with men with a hole in their penises, there would be a Hole In The Penis Committee developed immediately to fix that.

Coming up, what you can do if you want to help the women with fistulas. We'll be right back.

(Announcements)

WINFREY: Well, I said at the beginning of this show that if you are a woman born in America, you are automatically one of the luckiest women in the world, and by the end of this show, you would believe me. Do you believe me now?

Audience: Yes.

WINFREY: You believe me now. So I think a lot of women watching have been so moved by hearing your story and what you have done, what you've dedicated your life to do, a lot of people will want to help. What can we do to help?

Dr. HAMLIN: The main thing is that we need money, because it costs us \$450,000 US dollars every year to run our hospital. We have wonderful donors that do support us at the moment, but they won't go on forever. And I want to be sure that this hospital and this work, these new projects that we're running in the countryside, will continue after I've gone. I have five wonderful doctors to follow me and a wonderful staff who are dedicated to help these women, but without money, we can't keep going because these women can pay no fees, nothing, and this will go on for many, many decades, long after I've gone. The fistulas will still be there. And I want money invested for the future of this hospital.

WINFREY: Yeah. How long does a woman have to stay when she comes there?

Dr. HAMLIN: It depends on the injuries. Sometimes we can cure them in 10 days. Three weeks is the average stay. Some of these girls have terrible, crippling injuries as well. Nerve damage from the baby's head pressing on the spinal cord for so long, they become paralyzed, their legs, their feet. They lie in bed thinking, 'If I keep very still, the urine will dry up.' They get contractures of their knees and hips and wasting of the legs. They can't walk. They're carried in on the backs of their fathers. So they might be there for two or three years before we can do their vaginal injury repairs.

WINFREY: Really?

Dr. HAMLIN: It can be the most challenging surgery.

WINFREY: Really?

Dr. HAMLIN: The whole vagina can be destroyed.

WINFREY: We'll be right back.

(Announcements)

WINFREY: Lisa just said during commercial break what I was thinking -- and I'm sure many of you -- and that was we love the fact that you give them a new dress to go home. You give them a new dress and fare to take the bus home, correct?

Dr. HAMLIN: Yes. This is important, because just to say, 'You're cured, go home,' they might just stay in the streets of Addis Ababa and become another beggar or a little girl prostitute. So we make sure they get on the bus to go to their villages, and we give them a new dress. We let them choose the colors they want.

WINFREY: We saw you take the yellow back [in the video].

Dr. HAMLIN: We sometimes...

WINFREY: No, you get the blue. You don't get yellow. Yeah.

(Laughter)

Dr. HAMLIN: We give them a little talking to. We give them a card which describes what we've done, the surgery, and we say, 'This is a very special card. When you get home looking so beautiful in your new dress, there'll be one young man at the village who will say, "I'd like this girl for my new wife,"' and he will take her to his home and marry her, and we encourage them to marry. A girl of 16, if you say, 'You can't ever be married again,' is terrible. And so we say, 'You must get to a hospital or you'll get the same thing again.' And we say, 'When the baby starts walking in your stomach, you start walking towards a hospital, and show the doctor your card, and he will take care of you. He will do a cesarean section or he will do some delivery to give you a safe delivery and get you a beautiful live baby.'

WINFREY: We'll be right back. Thank you so much, Dr. Hamlin.

(Announcements)

WINFREY: I was just saying to Lisa, there's nothing we can do about the dowry situation in India, but I think just being aware of it makes us more enlightened people. But if you've been moved by what you heard by Dr. Hamlin and you want to make a contribution, you can go to www.fistulahospital.org or go to oprah.com for more information.

I thank you so much, Dr. Hamlin.

Dr. HAMLIN: Thank you very much.

WINFREY: Thank you. God bless you. God bless you.

Dr. HAMLIN: Thank you.

WINFREY: Thank you so much. We'll be after the show on Oxygen. We'll see you there.