Female genital tract fistula

Background

Dr Judith Goh regularly serves as a fistula surgeon with the international charity, Mercy Ships. As a medical student, she participated in a short-term service in India, for her medical elective term. On completing her medical specialty training in Obstetrics & Gynaecology, she spent six months in Ethiopia in 1995. This was her first experience with fistula surgery and she was later invited back to the Addis Ababa Fistula Hospital in 1997 to assist when there was a staff shortage. Since then, Dr Goh has worked in hospitals in Tanzania, served on a hospital ship operated by Mercy Ships in Sierra Leone and Liberia, and also assisted in training doctors in Bangladesh. Her 2007 trip was to carry out surgery and train doctors at the permanent fistula hospital opened by Mercy Ships in Sierra Leone. Dr Goh has been doing this work for 12 years now and says the people she works with in Australia are used to her wandering off to unusual places. They are usually quite shocked to find that it is voluntary and self-funded.

A few colleagues have taken up the challenge and have volunteered their services, and a few others have done fundraising for various fistula centres. Mercy Ships is an international Christian charity that has operated hospital ships in developing nations since 1978. Mercy Ships offers a range of health and community development services free of charge. Highly skilled surgeons on board the ships perform thousands of operations each year to correct disability, disfigurement and blindness. Medical and dental teams travel the countries and establish clinics to provide vaccination programs, dental treatment and basic health care for those with no access to those facilities. Local community health workers receive training in hygiene, nutrition and disease prevention. Mercy Ships builds hospitals, clinics, training facilities and basic housing where none exist. Agricultural projects help replenish livestock in war-torn areas and boost food production. Working in partnership with local people, Mercy Ships empowers communities to help themselves. The result is a way out of poverty. Mercy Ships has 15 support offices around the world, including the Australian office at Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast (information provided courtesy Amos Bennett, Mercy Ships, Australian Office).

Introduction

Obstetric fistula is the most common genital tract fistula worldwide. It is commonly due to childbirth injuries sustained during prolonged, obstructed and neglected labour. On average, women who develop genital tract fistulas labour for 4 days and over 90% deliver a stillborn baby. The fistula is caused by pressure, leading to necrosis, from the baby’s presenting part (usually head) being situated in the vagina for prolonged periods of time. This results in necrosis of tissue between the vagina and urethra/bladder and/or between the vagina and rectum/anus. Thus, a fistula or abnormal communication between the lower urinary tract (and/or rectum) and vagina develops. This results in constant leakage of urine and/or faeces (in those with rectovaginal fistulas) into the vagina.

Judith Goh with some of the women she has helped. On discharge from the hospital the women are given a new dress to mark a new beginning in their lives. (Photo courtesy Mercy Ships Australia)
Women’s health

Most (95%) maternal deaths occur in Africa and Asia. The lifetime risk of a woman dying during pregnancy and childbirth is 1 in 16 if she lives in sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 1 in 2800 if she lives in a developed country. For every maternal death, it is estimated that 30 other women develop chronic illness or disability such as obstetric fistula. In developing countries, most women deliver their babies in rural villages with no access to emergency obstetric services. In many areas, it is estimated that only 5% of deliveries are attended by skilled personnel. Often health care in government hospitals is too expensive for poor rural families, and lack of infrastructure such as roads limits access to existing hospitals.

Medical and social consequences of fistulae

The abnormal communication between the bladder and vagina or rectum and vagina causes women to be incontinent 24 hours a day. As the majority develop a fistula during their first delivery, many are young women, often teenagers and will continue to be incontinent until the fistula is surgically treated, or until they die.

Women who have a fistula often become outcasts as they are an embarrassment to themselves, their friends and families. These women are usually poor, and in those developing countries continence products are virtually unknown. Even if they were available, most women would not be able to afford them. The average income for a man in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa is 1-2 dollars a day. It is estimated that worldwide, over 100,000 women develop obstetric fistulae annually and at least 3 million women have to live with fistulae today. Successful anatomical closure of fistulas may be achieved in up to 90% of women in specialised fistula units. Post-fistula complications, such as pelvic organ dysfunction, reproductive and sexual dysfunction and mental health issues, commonly occur and are often neglected.

The role of Mercy Ships in West Africa

Mercy Ships is a charitable, Christian organisation founded in 1978 which uses hospital ships to deliver health care in war-torn West African countries such as Sierra Leone and Liberia. Care is provided without charge to the patients. All volunteers who work with the Mercy Ships are unpaid and pay for their own travel, food and accommodation. This allows for funds raised to be directed to patient care and other programs, and running of the ship and hospital. In these war-torn countries, basic commodities that are taken for granted in developed countries do not exist. There is no mains electricity and, therefore, generators are required. Water supply is usually unreliable.

Mercy Ships provide fistula care for women on the hospital ship itself and at a land-based fistula centre in Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone unit runs a paediatric outpatients clinic and provides care for women who have a fistula. This includes surgery to repair the fistula and ongoing care for other complications such as urinary incontinence following fistula closure. The Fistula Centre has an operating theatre, over 40 inpatient beds and a hostel for women awaiting surgery. Following fistula surgery, the women stay for an average of 2 weeks (until the indwelling catheter is removed). All medical and other care (such as food) are provided free of charge. There is also an outpatient service.
for women to return for follow up and ongoing care. The Mercy Ship Fistula Centre will also pay for former patients to have a caesarean section at a government hospital.

References