



Above Photo by Joni Kabana

# A Global Commitment to Improving Women's Health in Rural Ethiopia

December 2011

## NEWS

### PROJECT OVERVIEW

Footsteps to Healing is a collaborative project between Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) and Gimbie Adventist Hospital (GAH) in Ethiopia. The project focuses on providing medical training and service in key areas of women's health in rural Ethiopia. This project is gaining great momentum as it enters its second year.



Gimbie Adventist Hospital

### PROJECT DETAILS

Ethiopia ranks among six countries in the world with the highest maternal mortality. This is primarily due to lack of access to immediate and effective obstetric care, and lack of transportation and resources. Consequences of prolonged labor such as obstetric fistula (a hole in the bladder or rectum that communicates with the vagina) has devastating physical and social consequences to a woman. Multiple vaginal deliveries and prolonged labor in the setting of a lifetime of physical exertion has also created a silent epidemic of uterovaginal prolapse (protrusion of the uterus and vagina outside the body) among rural Ethiopian women.

Footsteps to Healing is a collaborative project created to address these health concerns. This is accomplished by providing free pelvic floor surgery to rural Ethiopian women, training local staff in surgical techniques and surgical care of patients, and performing outreach research to

understand women's health needs. In addition, the team assists the hospital in training midwives to prevent the high maternal mortality in the community.

### SUCCESSFUL TRIP IN NOVEMBER 2011

In November 2011, our team included 10 health care personnel (Renee Edwards MD, lead surgeon; Blake Osmundsen MD, surgeon; Abby Furukawa MD, surgeon, 4<sup>th</sup> Year GYN resident; Dawn Larson MD, anesthesiologist; Rita Silen CRNA, nurse anesthetist; Theresa Nera RN, OR nurse; Jenna Ferguson, OR scrub tech; Kathryn Quenneville RN, recovery nurse; Wren Kiczkowski RN, recovery nurse; and Elizabeth Edwards, support staff). The team spent 10 days at GAH and worked from dawn to dusk alongside local Ethiopian staff to perform 44 uterovaginal prolapse surgeries and one obstetric fistula surgery.

Prior to the trip, the team worked feverishly to collect medical supplies, recruit qualified team members, and raise funds. The success of the team was a culmination of months of preparation and team building, incredible generosity of donors, tremendous collaborative spirit of the GAH staff and the goodwill and expertise of the team.

Prior to the arrival of our team, GAH staff screened many women at their six outlying rural clinics and surrounding communities to find those with the most severe uterovaginal prolapse for surgery. Because women have no access to treatment (and can't afford it), this was not hard to do.

The cost of one surgery for a woman (\$175) is equivalent to several months' income for a family in rural Ethiopia. Many patients have lived with this condition for years, suffering from infection as a result of protrusion of their pelvic

organs, difficulty with emptying their bladder and bowel and unable to have intimate relationships with their partners.

The local Ethiopian gynecologist at GAH, Dr. Wasihun Alemayehu performed these surgeries with our team so that he can provide care to the women following our departure. Our nurses also shared their knowledge in operating room protocols, post surgical recovery and care with the nursing staff and nursing students at GAH.



Patient preparing for surgery

The team also delivered multiple textbooks to the newly established Midwifery college at GAH. This effort was led by Ellen Tilden, R.N, M.S, from the School of Nursing at OHSU. OHSU is working hard to establish a long-term collaboration with the GAH midwifery college to facilitate quality rural midwifery education to decrease the high maternal mortality and morbidity. Training local students from the rural community promises to be an important step toward retaining local providers. This also helps increase acceptability of maternal health care by the local community.

## OHSU STUDENTS PLAYING KEY ROLE

OHSU medical and public health students have also been active in collaborating with GAH nursing and midwifery students to do outreach community research on maternal and reproductive health topics. To date, 3 students from OHSU have participated in 6-week long research projects in Gimbie and surrounding health facilities and communities, funded by a travel grant from OHSU Global Health Center.

Under the mentorship of OHSU urogynecology faculty, Dr. Rahel Nardos, their work has been presented at various global and local conferences and will be instrumental in informing and shaping our future collaborative efforts.



OHSU students working with  
GAH nursing students

## SHAPING OUR FUTURE GYNECOLOGISTS

We have now had two chief ob/gyn residents from OHSU who have participated in this project, Drs Suzanne Burlone, class of 2011 and Dr. Abby Furukawa, class of 2012. According to Abby Furukawa, who was part of our November 2011 team to Gimbie, "To be able to go to Gimbie with this team was probably one of the most exciting and unique experiences in my entire residency experience. Not only was I able to further my understanding of medicine in the developing world, but I was given the gift of being able to operate for an intensive 10 day experience. Of course, this experience has deeply strengthened my surgical skills, which will carry into my gynecologic practice for the rest of my life. But what strikes me is that for the very first time in my career, I feel like my skill set actually made a deep and lasting difference in the lives of women. Although I am sure

I 'made a difference' in my previous domestic and international volunteering in homeless shelters, clinics, and hospitals, in no other setting have I left feeling so certain that I had concretely and physically improved an individual life. I left Ethiopia knowing that for the 45 women who received a prolapse (or fistula) operation, her life was undeniably enhanced. She will notice when she walks about in her village, cooks in her home, when she is able to void without replacing her bulge, and when she is able to be intimate with her partner again. I feel so incredibly grateful to have been a part of this project, and hope that those who have donated their time, talents, and money to this project know the impact they directly have had on the beautiful women of Ethiopia."

## APRIL 2012 TEAM TAKES SHAPE

Our next surgical project is planned for April 2012, in which surgeons, residents, anesthesiology staff and nurses will participate. We plan to perform 40-50 uterovaginal and fistula surgeries and strengthen our collaborative efforts in midwifery education and family planning training. This team will need to raise approximately \$15,000 to be able to compete the April project successfully.

## HOLIDAY DEDICATION

This holiday season, we invite our supporters to donate to this cause and dedicate your donation to your loved ones. We will send them a beautiful Footsteps to Healing Holiday card for any donation above \$50.00. By donating \$175, you can cover the cost of one pelvic surgery for a woman thus drastically improving her life. Your tax-deductible donation can be made to the global OHSU Foundation/Global women's health initiatives through our website link at [www.ohsuwomenshealth.com/global](http://www.ohsuwomenshealth.com/global)

Alternatively, you may enter this weblink directly into your browser to make the donation:

<https://www.ohsu.edu/foundation/giving/default.cfm?fcode=SMFEMHEALTH&src=OHSB1MMT>

If you would like to dedicate this donation to someone, please make sure you follow the link and fill out the name and address of the person you would like to dedicate to.

Thank you for your continued support of our project. This project is only possible because of your generous support. We hope to continue to focus on local capacity building and long term commitment to improving all aspects of women's health using our tremendous potential as a premier medical and research institution. For more information, contact project lead Dr. Nardos at [rahel.nardos@gmail.com](mailto:rahel.nardos@gmail.com)

