About Obstetric Fistula

What is Obstetric Fistula?
Obstetric fistula is a preventable and mostly treatable condition that primarily affects young women from poor backgrounds. Fistula is one of the most devastating of all pregnancy-related disabilities. Usually the result of obstructed labor coupled with a lack of skilled medical care, obstetric fistula most often leads to permanent incontinence – a continuous leakage of urine and loss of control over bowel movements.

How does it happen?
A vaginal fistula, which usually affects pregnant women, results from prolonged labor, usually lasting two to five days, with delivery occurring only after the baby dies. During labor, the baby’s head and the woman’s pubic bone form a vice, cutting off blood flow to the tissue trapped in this area. Following delivery, the dead tissue sloughs away, leaving an abnormal opening between the birth canal and the bladder (less frequently the rectum). Unable to control the flow of urine (and/or feeces), the woman is perpetually wet and soiled. Affected women are often abandoned by their husbands and ostracized by their families and communities.

Fistula Statistics
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that every year between 50,000 and 100,000 women sustain an obstetric fistula during childbirth.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than two million women are currently living with obstetric fistulas, a large proportion of which are in Africa.
- Women with fistula tend to be young, illiterate and poor, and live in remote areas. (womenone.org)

Transformational Health Care through Fistula Programs

Bringing Hope and Healing
Mercy Ships aims to reduce the effects of fistula in women in West Africa by providing specialized medical treatment and training. Mercy Ships uses its hospital ship and also partners with land-based programs to deliver transformational health care to the forgotten poor.

Fistula Repair Operations
Onboard our ship, the Africa Mercy, Mercy Ships performs free fistula repair operations for affected women. The healed patients are given new dresses and headdresses as symbols of their restored life.

Training & Prevention
To help build the capacity of health care systems in developing nations to address the condition of fistula, Mercy Ships networks with and provides training for local & international health care professionals including surgeons, nurses and traditional birth attendants.

Accomplishment
Since 1978, Mercy Ships performed more than 61,000 life-changing operations such as cleft lip and palate repair, cataract removal, orthopedic procedures, facial reconstruction and obstetric fistula repair.

More about fistula: www.endfistula.com/
Images, case studies and additional information about Mercy Ships can be found online at www.mercyships.org