Sierra Leone: Yeabu’s Homecoming
Transcribed 6-11

Women here in the west African country of Sierra Leone give birth an average of 7 times in their lives. In the rural areas, little or no access to maternal healthcare makes each pregnancy dangerous. 39 year old Yeabu Thronka, is a farmer from Bombali?? District, about 130 miles northeast of the capital city of Freetown. Yeabu has had 7 children, but only 3 survived. During her last labor, an obstruction blocked her birth canal, and she had no way to get to a hospital, about a day’s travel away.

Sub titles.

Nobody could help her, not even a village midwife was present. Finally, after 3 agonizing days, Yeabu gave birth to a stillborn. Immediately afterward, she began to drip urine constantly. Many women suffer the same problem as Yeabu. It’s called obstetric fistula which results from prolonged obstructed labor. As the baby’s head pushes against the pelvis, the surrounding tissue dies forming a hole, or fistula between the vaginal cavity and the bladder, or even the rectum, or both. The baby usually dies, and many women do too. But if they survive, the fistula leaves them incontinent and they are often shunned by their husbands, and families.

Yeabu was an outcast for 4 years. Dr. Lewis is an obstetric fistula surgeon at the Aberdeen West Africa fistula center in Freetown.
- I see more or less people who are suffering and desperate for help.

The center was built in 2005 by Mercy Ships, an American relief agency that offers medical care to those in developing world.
- it’s a shame that in these countries we are still talking about fistulas
Obstetric fistulas is a preventable condition that was eradicated in United States and Europe over a century ago. But in Africa and Asia, at least 100,000 new cases develop each year. Fewer than 7000 are treated.
- They all become depressed. They do not just have a hole in their bladder, there’s much more - obstetric injury complex.

Dr. Lewis was born in Moscow, to a Russian mother and a Sierra Leonean father, who brought her back to his homeland when she was a child.
- I just do not see how it is not possible to give attention to these women. You have seen how young they are. It’s just heart breaking to see the devastation. It would be difficult for me not to do what I am doing.

This more tropical nation is about the size of South Carolina, nestled between Guinea, Liberia and the Atlantic Ocean. The land is abundant in diamonds, and rich in minerals, but the profits disappear into a web of corruption. And a civil war that ended in 2002 devastated its already broken healthcare system. today, only 168 doctors and a handful of obstetricians serve a population of 6.1 million.

Dr. Lewis is the only local physician performing obstetric fistula surgeries so it is no wonder so few women are treated. It’s also hard for doctors to find them.

Bernadette Furfana??? Is part of Mercy Ships team that scours the countryside in search of patients. Bernadette is on a 3 day trip to Kanaqui??? A rural area about 4 hours northeast of Freetown. She stops at health clinics along the way.

The surgery costs Mercy Ships $300, more than the average annual income in the country. 70% of the population lives below the poverty line, earning less than $1 per day. And obstetric fistula patients are unlikely to know about a cure. They are poor and illiterate women, living in remote areas. Getting to them
can be challenging. For hours, villages try to dislodge the vehicle. It is nightfall before the team gets back on the road. The next day, Bernadette meets 5 young women, who have trekked from their villages to the Kanaqui local hospital. They hope the mercy ship can help them. But first, Bernadette must screen each patient to make sure they are surgical candidates.

The women use rags to absorb the constant drip of urine.

In just 3 days, Bernadette has found 2 new patients and identified others to bring back on the next trip. These women may have never left time villages before but today, they make the long journey to the capital in the hopes of restoring their lives.

My first encounter with obstetric fistula patients happened in 2001 when a NGO, the international medical corps came across young women with obstetric fistula and they were trapped behind rebel lines.

Dr. Lewis began operating out of Freetown’s dilapidated maternal hospital, the only one in the country. We had so many constraints, electricity was a problem, running water was a problem. 8 years later she is working out of Mercy ship’s specialty clinic and has performed 100s of operations. Dr. Lewis avoids the very complex cases.

For the meantime, they do not have everything on the ground to tackle some of these surgeries.

Mercy Ships provide about 350 operations per year, about 80% successful.

I would say maybe it’s my dream come true, the free standing center where these women can come and freely access this treatment.

For the first time in years, Yeabu is dry. She has not leaked any urine since the operation weeks ago. Dressed in brand new handmade outfits, she and 4 others are ready to go home. But not before they lead a ceremony, called gladdy, gladdy. The women are advised not to get pregnant for 2 years, and to avoid sex for 6 months. When they do get pregnant, Mercy Ships will pay for the first Cesarean section.

Heading home, Yeabu stops to give a testimony to the chiefs of Bombali district. It was the paramount chief that encouraged her to go for treatment.

Yeabu is back home with the only ones who accepted her when she was an outcast, her children.