

2012 James F. Hornback Ethical Humanist of the Year

Today, with pride and gratitude, we celebrate and honor the achievements of the St. Louis Ethical Society's 2012 Ethical Humanist of the Year Award recipient, L. Lewis Wall, M.D., D.Phil. The EHOY Award was established in 1976 by James S. McDonnell in honor of J.F. Hornback's 25 years of St. Louis Ethical Society Leadership.

You've heard it said, "Think globally; act locally." L. Lewis Wall, M.D., not only embodies this dictum, he has taken all of his knowledge, training and experience as an honored physician, surgeon and professor of obstetrics and gynecology to realize the beginnings of a global dream serving women in the neediest local communities of Sub-Saharan Africa, treating a traumatic medical condition that has condemned thousands of them to live as suffering outcasts. Repairing these women's obstetric fistulas, or openings in the vaginal canal, and restoring their lives



to ones of dignity and hope, is an "absolute requirement of bettering the human condition," declares Dr. Wall, who has been aware of this wide-spread condition (often resulting in infant mortality) in developing countries for over 30 years, at the same time it has been almost unheard of in the United States. A "perfect storm" of inadequate healthcare infrastructure and delivery of care; poor schooling; early marriage and pregnancy before pelvic growth is complete; plus prolonged labor, results in thousands of cases of obstetric fistulas each year in Africa, according to Dr. Wall. And, while establishing remedies for conditions that cause fistulas is daunting, the medical remedy for fistulas is not. Surgery is simple and inexpensive; providing it is not. This has never stopped Dr. Wall.

Since living, studying and working in Africa in the '70s, as a graduate student in anthropology, Dr. Wall had been profoundly moved by the medical needs of the African people. Once he made the critical decision to enter the field of medicine and specialize in urogynecology, he nurtured his global vision of treating Third World women with obstetric fistulas, until his efforts resulted in the establishment of the Worldwide Fistula Fund (WFF) in 1995. By then, Dr. Wall's career in medicine had taken him from the University of Kansas School of Medicine, medical fellowships in England, and seats on the medical faculties of Duke University, Emory University School of Medicine and Louisiana State University Medical Center. Subsequent to the establishment of the WFF, Dr. Wall has built on the commanding respect and acclaim of his peers (he received a Distinguished Faculty Award from the Washington University School of Medicine in 2011) as a practicing physician and as a professor and writer in not only his specialty, but in anthropology.

Joining the Washington University faculty in 2002, Dr. Wall holds a joint appointment in the Department of Anthropology, where he teaches courses from a cross-cultural perspective---straddling biology and medicine---on subjects such as Human Birth, Maternal Mortality, the Female Life Cycle and Anthropological Perspectives on the Fetus. In addition to teaching medical students and training residents as Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Washington University School of Medicine and supervising Ph.D. students in the Department of Anthropology, Dr. Wall pursues projects creating courses in medical ethics and compassion. But, the project closest to his heart has been a long-standing dream to build a clinic in Niger to treat women with fistulas. In February of this year, the Danja Fistula Center opened, after 20 years of “dogged pursuit” of awareness, funds and trained personnel to serve its patients. This facility, and the many more Dr. Wall hopes to open, will provide maternal health care and education outreach; the training of more doctors in fistula prevention and treatment; and the teaching of micro-financing to promote economic independence. Toward that end, Dr. Wall has launched an ambitious goal of a 12-year, \$1.5 billion campaign to create similar centers in all corners of the world where such care is needed.

Although Dr. Wall is pragmatic about the Danja clinic and others of the future “needing an external lifeline for a decade or more,” he is confident that with increasing commitment to declare this medical condition a crucial focus for government involvement through foreign aid authorizations and for private citizens through financial generosity, there will come a time when Africa’s women are assured of the means of leaving lives of outcast misery for lives as fully-functioning members of their societies. For his many years of ceaseless effort to ensure that women have help to lead lives of worth and dignity, we profoundly thank and honor L. Lewis Wall, M.D., as the 2012 Ethical Humanist of the Year.