

THE AUSTRALIAN

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NEW SIZE, NEW LOOK

LONDON BOMBINGS

Aussie survivor's amazing will to live after losing both her legs

WALKAWAY WIVES

The new mid-life crisis

FICTION BONUS

by Maeve Binchy & Maggie Alderson

TONI COLLETTE

How I lost 12 kilos in two weeks

25 pages of spring recipes

Pasta, desserts & Neil Perry's roast lamb

Nicky Buckley

ON FAME, HER BOYS AND HER "NOT SO PERFECT" LIFE

THE NIGHT JOHN KENNEDY JNR'S PLANE CRASHED

A moving tribute by Carolyn's best friend

Gerard Depardieu

on poverty, food and his insatiable need to be loved

FIND A FARMER A WIFE

meet our bumper crop of bachelors



NATALIE IMBRUGLIA

Pop star's brave fight to save outcast African mothers



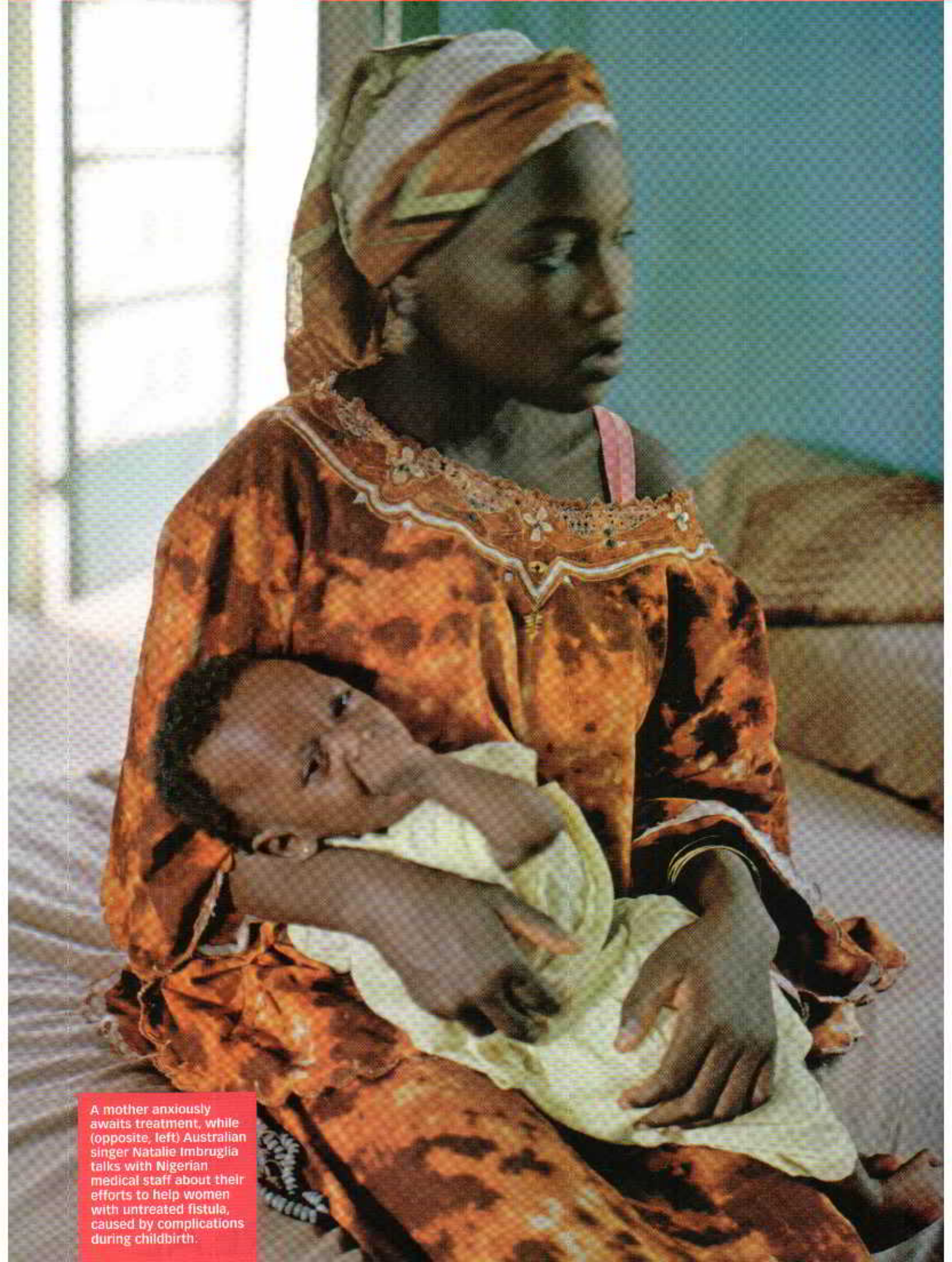
LOCHIE & KARINA

The Daddos show off their beautiful baby Daisy Isabella



KERRY ARMSTRONG

Rediscovered love with her childhood sweetheart



A mother anxiously awaits treatment, while (opposite, left) Australian singer Natalie Imbruglia talks with Nigerian medical staff about their efforts to help women with untreated fistula, caused by complications during childbirth:

WANGIN CUKOH
YOVO FITSABE
KYAUTA
A KEYINSHI
KALU ALA KUNA
NO KATTO



POP QUEST

She's a pop princess and the face of cosmetics giant L'Oréal, yet, as **William Langley** discovers, Natalie Imbruglia's latest venture, to help thousands of suffering African mothers, known derisively as "puddle women", is possibly her finest act to date.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLIN BELL



NATALIE IMBRUGLIA'S car is bouncing down a potholed road in northern Nigeria, past listing trucks, footsore tribesmen and scattered villages where women with ruined lives live. Tens of thousands of them. The victims of fistula.

"When you realise what a nightmare fistula is," says Natalie, "it seems incredible that it's such a neglected cause. Seeing what these women suffer breaks your heart."

Obstetric fistula is an injury caused by obstructed childbirth. The mother's internal tissues are damaged, leaving her chronically – often doubly – incontinent. There are at least two million sufferers worldwide.

Usually the baby dies and the mother, unable to stay clean and reeking of her own waste, is driven from her home. Many turn to begging or prostitution to survive.

Natalie, 30, the pop-singing beauty and former *Neighbours* star, is here to help, but in this remote, socially conservative part of Africa, the task ahead is enormous.

"I hadn't heard of fistula," she says. "Understandably, because it barely exists in the developed world, but here it is a problem that destroys women's lives."

We are heading for Katsina, an ancient trading town. Take away the battered mopeds and you could be in the 13th century. Peddlers in bright robes hawk their wares, wreathed in the smoke of

brushwood fires. For all its cinematic quality, this ramshackle town is one of the frontlines in the fight against fistula. Nigeria is believed to have more cases than any other country – as many as 800,000 – and the majority are here in the rural north.

The suffering of the fistula victims – the "puddle women" as they are sometimes derisively known – is extreme. Many dehydrate or starve themselves in the hope of reducing their leakage. Some attempt to crudely block bodily passages. Most suffer from agonising rashes, sores and chapping from the constant wetness.

Yet treating fistula is neither difficult, nor particularly expensive. The tissue damage can be repaired through surgery for around \$400, but such a sum is beyond the means of most village women of sub-Saharan Africa. And there are deeper problems – many linked to the traditional attitudes of this Muslim-dominated region. Which is why, before visiting the local hospital, we need an audience with His Royal Highness the Emir.

Natalie, who rose to worldwide fame with her 1997 hit *Torn* and now divides her time between London, LA and Australia with her musician husband Daniel Johns, 26, became a

spokesperson for the global Campaign to End Fistula, led by the United Nations Population Fund, after meeting Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin business empire, last November.

"I had been looking for a charity to be involved with," she says. "There are lots of good organisations that want you to turn up for a lunch or whatever – but I wanted to do more, to be seriously involved, and I was expressing my frustration to Richard, when he told me about fistula."

The tycoon put her in touch with Virgin Unite, the group's charitable arm, which was already involved in the global campaign and, earlier this year, Natalie travelled to Nigeria and Ethiopia to see for herself.

It was in the spartan operating theatre of the Babbar Ruga Hospital, near Katsina, that the terrible reality hit. "I couldn't stay in that room," Natalie tells me. "I wanted to run away and cry. Then I thought, 'If I can't even watch this, imagine what it must be like having it.' I made a decision I would try to help these women, however

slow and frustrating it would be to bring change."

It is in the hope of effecting such change that we are gathered in the throne room of the 18th century palace of Alhaji >>>

Above: Natalie talks with hospital staff and patients afflicted with fistula in northern Nigeria, where as many as 800,000 women suffer from this debilitating condition.



Left and above: For thousands of women whose life has been destroyed by their condition, the fistula hospital in Katsina, northern Nigeria, gives hope.

women whose bodies have not developed sufficiently to allow the baby an easy birth route. The newborn's head tears a hole in the soft

Muhammadu Kabir Usman, the Emir of Katsina. As royal residences go, this is hardly Versailles, yet, even though the power of the Emirs may no longer be absolute, their leadership is the kind the people look to. Without them, little progress is possible.

Magnificently costumed courtiers, leather bullwhips clasped in bejewelled fingers, sprawl at the emir's feet. Natalie rises to address the assembly. A tiny, casually dressed figure, she thanks the emir for receiving us and asks for his help in spreading the word to women in remote villages that fistula treatment is available.

centre, performing 1500 operations a year. It was founded by Dr Kees Waaldijk, a Dutch surgeon, who came to Nigeria 20 years ago to work among lepers, before discovering the plight of fistula women. The wards are bare and faintly malodorous, but there is an unmistakable sense of progress here.

The women are a pitiful sight. Most are attached to drip tubes that carry their urine into little plastic pots. They lie on simple beds in the half-light, waiting their turn to be operated on. Maryam, a slender 20-year-old from a village outside Katsina, has lived with fistula for three years.

tissue between the vaginal passage and the bladder, making it impossible to retain urine.

Virtually none of the women at Babbar Ruga has been in a hospital before, nor, you can safely assume, heard a Natalie Imbruglia record. Stardom takes you only so far in this part of the world. When the average annual wage is a few hundred dollars, no one cares too much how your latest single's doing.

Yet the anonymity suits Natalie. Here, she can listen and learn, and it's impossible not to be impressed by the passion and down-to-earth realism with which she embraces an unfashionable cause.

"I BEGAN TO LEAK. I WAS EMBARRASSED AND AFRAID BECAUSE I KNOW WHAT HAPPENS TO WOMEN WHO ARE LIKE THIS. THE LEAKING NEVER STOPS."

There is something else she wishes to say – no permanent change will be possible without a shift in the attitudes of men. In this patriarchal, Muslim-dominated society, many husbands are reluctant to let their wives travel anywhere. Modern medicine is widely viewed with suspicion and inherently intimate procedures, such as a fistula repair, are borderline taboo.

The emir listens and makes a speech in response, which – while not directly addressing Natalie's points – indicates a willingness of spirit. The courtiers sing our praises as we sweep out through the palace gates, heading for Babbar Ruga.

The hospital is a leading fistula treatment

"I was in labour for four days," she says. "I became unconscious and my family thought I might die and went for a doctor. It was my first baby, but it was dead. Afterwards I began to leak. I was embarrassed and afraid because I know what happens to women who are like this. The leaking never stops. It happens when you are asleep and when you are working. My husband went away, but I was lucky, my parents let me stay with them."

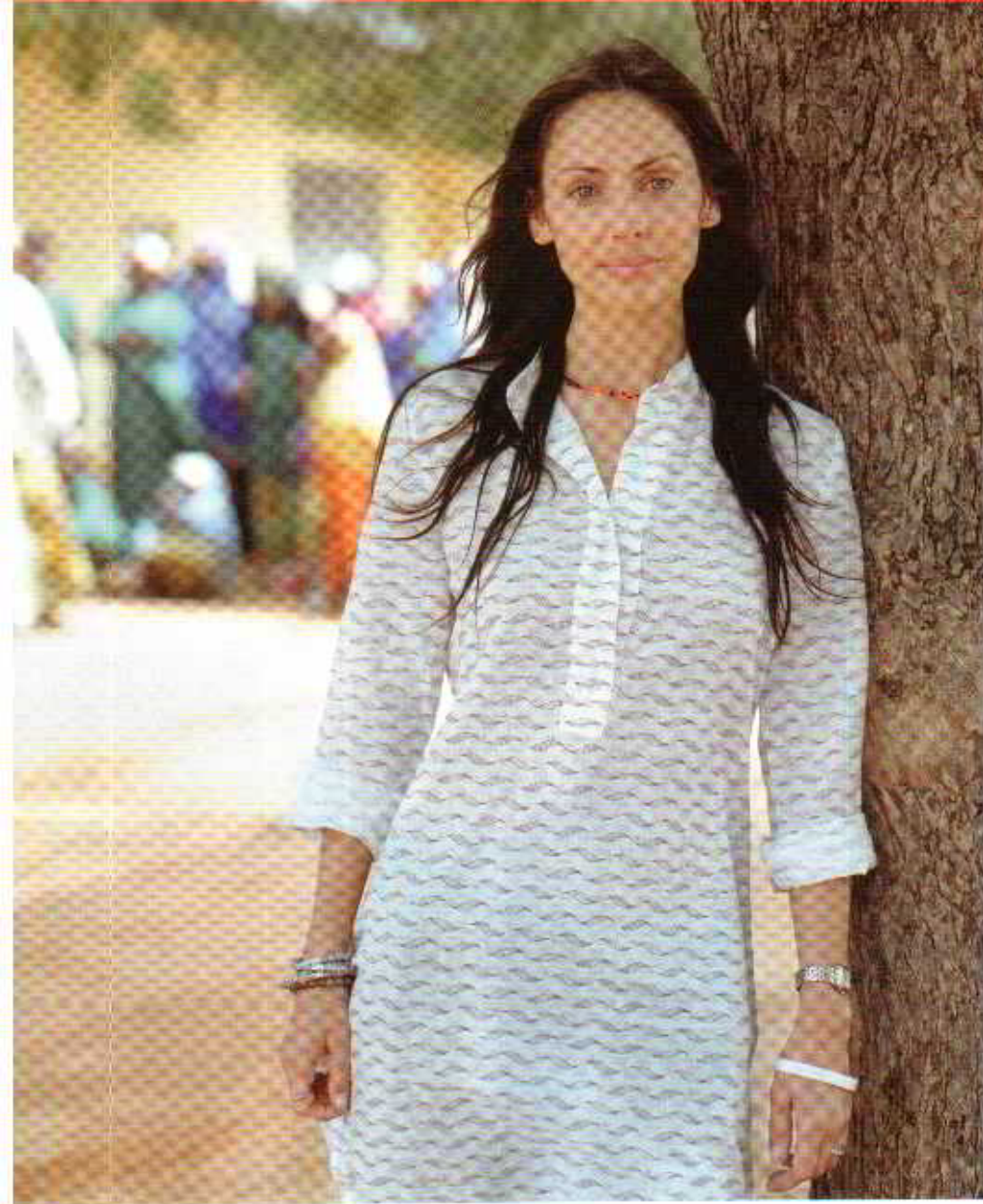
"It's not a complicated operation," says Dr Abdulrasheed Yusuf, a specialist surgeon. "We get a success rate of close to 90 per cent for straightforward cases."

Fistula particularly affects younger

The celeb factor only comes into play in the West, as a means of raising public awareness. "I think every celebrity has a responsibility to do something positive with the media exposure they get," says Natalie. "We are in a privileged position and we shouldn't spend all our time sitting around rabbiting on about ourselves."

Earlier this year, in Ethiopia, she met Dr Catherine Hamlin, an Australian prize-winning pioneer of fistula treatment, who, in 1974, with her late husband, Reg, founded a hospital in Addis Ababa. "It is an amazing place," says Natalie. "Full of purpose. If there is a model for what I'd try to create here, then that is it."

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Left: Natalie grew up with a desire to help others and the work she is doing in Nigeria and Ethiopia makes her feel fulfilled.

Dr Hamlin has described fistula as “the oldest medical cause in the world”. It has existed for as long as women have had babies. Coins dug out of the pyramids depict images of fistula.

Why, then – when famine and AIDS in Africa play constantly on the developed world’s conscience – does it receive so little attention?

of fistula is closely connected to cultural attitudes. Women here live in varying forms of seclusion, requiring the permission of their husbands even to leave home. Educating, or extending rights to them may be a government objective, but on the ground it hardly registers as a priority.

Consequently, women seem to have no sense of outrage, or even curiosity, about

She sighs. “Look,” she says, “I can’t solve all the problems here. All I can do is raise some money and get the message out that these women can be helped.”

Natalie was brought up in Berkeley Vale, on the NSW Central Coast, the second of four daughters of Elliot Imbruglia, an Italian-born horticultural worker, and his schoolteacher wife, Maxene.

Dreams of stardom touched her early, and in her mid-teens she was looking for a break in TV. At 16, after making a handful of commercials, she got the part of Beth in *Neighbours* and was later voted one of the 10 most beautiful women in the world.

This storming start could easily have turned a teenager’s head, but Natalie had been raised with strong core values.

“Mum and Dad brought us up to think about people who were worse off than ourselves,” she says. “When I got the part in *Neighbours*, I felt very fortunate to be earning that money.

“One day, I was just flipping through a TV magazine and there was a World Vision advertisement in it, asking people to sponsor a child, and I wanted to do that. Then I went out to Kenya to meet the little girl I was sponsoring. So, yes, I think it’s always been in me.”

In 1995, Natalie moved to London. This time, success was harder to come by, until *Torn*, the edgy, acoustic guitar-driven ballad that shot her into the big league, and the release of her album *Left of the Middle* confirmed her arrival as one of pop’s biggest stars.

So is her mission here to Africa, in some sense, a search for meaning? “Gosh,” she says. “I hadn’t thought of it like that. I don’t know. I do know that by doing this I feel fulfilled. I’m glad I did something.

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It is partly because improved medical care has allowed us the luxury of forgetting about it. The West’s last dedicated fistula hospital, in New York City, closed its doors in 1895.

It is partly because the condition does not lend itself to appealing images. Put a starving child on television and aid will flow in. A woman standing in a puddle of pee lacks the power to move.

There is a further reason. One that Natalie’s travels around Nigeria have constantly touched upon. The incidence

what has befallen them. Dreadful as their condition is, they accept it with passivity.

“My mother had it, too,” one woman tells me, “so I knew what to expect.” Many live in isolated colonies of fellow sufferers, out of sight – and smell – of their neighbours.

“We have to educate these women about their bodies, free them from the idea that all this is predestined and convince them that if you go to a clinic or a hospital, things will be better for you. We have to make the men understand, too.”

“People have a right to be suspicious of celebrities taking up causes. People do attach themselves to things for their own reasons. But you have to be passionate and make sure that if you do something like this, you’ll be able to stick at it.”

There will be many other trips like this for her. Exhausting, often frustrating forays into a world where mind-sets are slow to move. It’s a colossal challenge, but one Natalie Imbruglia has proved worthy of. ■

Support the global Campaign to End Fistula, visit www.endfistula.org.