I don't know what it is but I don't think it's serious

By Tim Crossley
Published by Royal College of General Practitioners
ISBN: 978-0-85084-318-7
PRICE: £24.95

To the Editor: This book takes an interesting look at general practice from some unusual angles. Tim Crossley, the author, is a general practitioner (GP) in an inner-city practice in Wolverhampton, United Kingdom (UK), and addresses issues that arise when the GP has insufficient data or back-up to make decisions as well as the uncertainty that arises from the conflicting goals that have to be faced in everyday modern practice. It is a book that is difficult to categorise because of the different terrains that it covers, from "coping with colleagues" to "medical status".

Those of us blessed with no insight into our own psychopathology may not recognise many of these issues or, at least, may not have been made aware of them.

One of the themes of the book, as the author states, is the "GP's baggage", which is well dealt with in a chapter on uncertainty in clinical decision making. This is further developed in a chapter entitled "I don't know what it is but I don't think it is meningitis", which addresses the problems that are often at the back of our minds concerning missing serious illnesses.

There are three very clever descriptions of how a journalist, a lawyer and a politician would each explain to a child's parent that he doesn't know what it is but doesn't think it is meningitis. GPs often tell patients that it is "very difficult to diagnose meningitis in the earliest stage". Crossley says this statement is untrue. It is not difficult. It is impossible.

There is obviously a lot of questioning going on in GP practice in the UK. For instance, there is a chapter entitled "What am I here for?", which is not, I believe, a question many South African doctors would ask. This question seems to arise from the low morale that excess management brings whereby many UK GPs now view themselves as simplistic referral agencies and screening clinics.

I thought this book was going to be right up my alley and in some ways it was but, in others, I found it a rather sad commentary on what has become of the British National Health System, in which I was trained. It appears to have become a massive leaden bureaucracy that has undermined the confidence of its workers (the subtitle of the book is "Confidence and Decisiveness in Primary Care"). This seems to have happened insidiously over a number of years while the health system was becoming more and more politicised and the British media, short of news, relentlessly pursued the deficiencies of health care delivery.

This book illustrates how different British general practice is compared to much of South African generalist practice. Many of the problems facing the British GP are administrative, legal and legislative, which may translate into the GPs not being keen to take responsibility for the clinical decisions he or she has to consider. In South Africa, we don't often have the luxury of this choice.

Chris Ellis
Family physician, KwaZulu Natal
Correspondence to: Dr Chris Ellis, e-mail: cristobalellis@gmail.com