



## The vagrant in their eyes

Several years ago, I was driving my bakkie on a farm in the Drakensberg. We were passing a field in which a herd of Hereford cows were grazing. The farmer, who was in the passenger seat, casually mentioned that he noticed that one of the cows was ready for the bull. I asked him how he knew that he was in the presence of bovine ovulation. He responded by saying that he had had his milk herd for over 30 years, and knew most of the cows by name. He thought that he caught a movement of the cow out of the corner of his eye, and from experience and stored informal memory, he knew she was ready for the bull (as we fertility experts say).

For a long time, I have been fascinated by the non-verbal ways in which we communicate, by all the messages that we send out with our body movements (not necessarily to attract the bull!). We send out messages by the ways in which we move, dress and use our hands, which the philosopher, Ludwig Wittengstein, said were organs of language. Edward Sapir described non-verbal communication as “an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known by no-one, and understood by all”.

Perhaps the most expressive are eye movements, often downward looking when a patient is thinking, or trying to access his or her thoughts. It makes me wonder what is going on in there, and the processes that are being used.

The Irish poet, Louis MacNeice, in his poem called *Conversation*, wrote:

*Watch the vagrant in their eyes  
Who sneaks away while they are talking to you*

*Into some black wood behind the skull  
Following un-, or other, realities  
Fishing for shadows in a pool.*

Patients give you an answer that is sometimes expected, and at other times, not what you anticipated at all. You then follow up these clues with direct questions, which at times, may scare the patient off like trout in a disturbed stream.

Louis MacNiece describes this further on in his poem:  
*(they)...look you straight in the eyes,  
put up a barrage of common sense  
to baulk intimacy.*

My blunt intrusions may then have missed the opportunity of silence, and the patient has retreated back off into the black wood.

### Dr Chris Ellis

Family Physician, Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal  
e-mail: cristobalellis@gmail.com

