

## Medicine keeps you humble

### Dr Claasens

Humility is a virtue, albeit a chastising one.

We often experience this painful truth as we learn from our patients.

The short, sinewy old man stood facing me. For many years he had driven the roadgrader up and down his allocated stretch of sandy road. He had lived and slept in the metal caravan parked under a large tree near the working site. In the broiling summer and in the freezing winter, it had been his home.

Through innumerable years of exposure to intense reflected sunlight and fine floury dust, his eyes had become smaller and smaller. They were now permanently hooded. He also blinked rapidly and continuously. The lids flickered and fluttered. Every now and then a quick, furtive glance from the bright little eyes flashed at me.

I was slowly been hypnotized!

To circumvent this, the more and faster his lids flickered, the more distended my eyes became. Until I fixed him in an unblinking, glassy stare - all to no avail.

We made a strange pair.

"You have lifted me up," he said.

I very much doubted, for although short, he was very compact with a high density. He repeated his words.

"You have lifted me up. I was against the ground. All these years, all those capsules and

tablets ... nothing but meal, mealiemeal..."

I stood up straighter, not wavering from my fixed gaze.

That night I watched the flicker of his small fire, away from us across the dry omuramba. So reminiscent of his eyes.

He had uplifted me!

But the first chastisement was about to begin.

In the early years, because of the language barrier, many patients sent me a letter written in advance by an interpreter.

I felt very flattered when I started reading.

"Dear Doctor, Since first I consulted you, I have been to no other doctor. I am now very ill..."

This was not a happy reference for the doctor in constant attendance.

Rapidly and forcefully my illusions were shattered. The balloon of my ego had been deflated, the bubble of complacency burst.

Then the other day old Phillipus came to see me. He asked me how long I had worked amongst these people. I replied that it was close on 15 years.

"Lovely, beautiful!" he said. "Mooi! Mooi!"

He was already quite grey, which made him very old and venerable amongst his people. He was also

very long in the tooth, with the gums progressively regressing.

This gave him a canine-like appearance. When he smiled, and this was often, he resembled the Cheshire cat. He told me that he had been born in 1910.

Then he made a very profound statement.

"The oldest people are the oldest people," he said.

It took some time to puzzle out this Irish Africanism.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Today's people have no bones," he answered.

"What do you mean ... no bones (geen beine)?"

He replied that one could ask any of the old people because they all knew. They still had real 'beine'.

"And today?" I asked.

He was surprised by my ignorance.

"But they have nylon bones!"

"You could even feel the nylon," he said. "And what's more they had also lost their strength".

And then he looked me up and down. I could see surmise, speculation, almost conviction in his face. Then suddenly certain knowledge leaped into his eyes. He knew. The doctor had nylon bones!

And I even thought for a while that there was marrow in my bones!