



## Appearances can be deceptive

*A wealthy man invited Ikkyu to a banquet. Ikkyu arrived dressed in his beggar's robes. The host, not recognising him, chased him away. Ikkyu went home, changed into his ceremonial robe of purple brocade and returned. He was shown great respect and was received in the dining room. There, he took off his robe and put it on the cushion. "It seems you invited the robe, instead of me," he said and left. - Zen story*

In the early 1970s, I dropped out of medical practice and went "walk about" in Mexico and Central America. On returning, I went into practice in a small Natal Midlands town, but I retained my long hair and beard from my hippie excursion. One Saturday, my family weren't at home and I was in the garden, digging away in a shabby shirt and a pair of ragged old trousers, when the teenage girl from next door came over to say that her family had also gone out and that their dog was sick. Would I have a look at it?

Indeed, the dog was lying there looking very sad with a temperature and pale gums. Drawing on my vast veterinary experience, I diagnosed "biliary". Biliary in dogs is a tick bite fever that is caused by a parasite, *Babesia canis*, which is introduced into the body by the bite of the yellow dog tick. It is much like malaria in human patients.

It was after midday and we phoned the vet on call who told me off, asking: "For how long has the dog been sick?" and "Why have you waited so long to call?" and "Do you realise that this is now an after-hours call on a Saturday?" Cowering on our end of the telephone line, we admitted our failings as human beings and carers for dogs and went into pleading mode. We were curtly told to meet him at the veterinary rooms at 2 pm.

On arrival there, we found that we were not the only substandard pet owners on the planet. Two gentlemen were already waiting with a dishevelled mongrel of multiple genetic heritage. The mongrel's owners also looked fairly scruffy. What made things even more troubling for myself and the girl was that they were both very intoxicated.

From the general erratic conversation, it appeared that they had spent Saturday lunch at the Plough Hotel and then came home to find that their dog was sick. This added to our feelings of unease as the girl and I were eager to appear responsible because we

knew we were already in trouble. It was a dismaying picture of two sad dogs and four unkempt adults.

The two inebriates kept up a running commentary and were in quite a jolly mood until the vet strode in. He came in, furious. He ordered them to put out their cigarettes and to pull themselves together. They followed him into his consulting room, dropping the dog a couple of times on the way in. We could hear them getting a good tongue lashing as we meekly sat, waiting our turn.

Our turn came and I was curtly ordered to put the dog on the examining table. Then we had a repeat performance of why we had fallen short of the normal criteria for pet owners. "Do you have no consideration for time and others?" he asked.

The girl hid behind me and I tried to stand my ground in my rather fetching gardening attire.

"And what do you do?" he enquired, as he stuck a thermometer up the dog's bottom.

"I am the new general practitioner in the village," I replied.

There was a poignant pause in the conversation and then the most amazing transformation into goodwill and effusiveness. He said how good it was to meet me and that I must join the country club and come over for dinner. So it all ended well with some vigorous handshaking and the dog got better.

A week later, I was awoken by a patient at 2 am, complaining of a headache. "For how long have you had the headache?" I enquired. He said that he had had it for over two weeks. "How nice of you to call me at this time," I replied. "Would you like to come around for dinner as well?"

### **Dr Chris Ellis**

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