



Judging by appearances

She was only 15 years old. Both she and her parents were in tears when they came to my clinic in Tanzania. The story came tumbling out between her sobs. She had just been expelled from school. They said she was pregnant. She vehemently denied it saying that she didn't even have a boyfriend. In a country where secondary schooling was at a premium and places for girls like gold dust, it was totally unacceptable for her to be pregnant and expect to stay on at school. She knew that.

Once everyone had calmed down a bit I took a careful history and examined her. She certainly looked as though she might be pregnant. Her abdomen was enlarged to the size of a term pregnancy and a pregnancy test was positive. However, I couldn't feel any fetal parts or pick up the fetal heart with a Sonicaid. We didn't have access to ultrasound and had minimal laboratory facilities. I was able to get an x-ray to look for bony parts and this proved negative.

The girl was relieved to be believed. We agreed to an exploratory laparotomy. She proved to have a very large ovarian cyst and my suspicions were confirmed that this was a malignant teratoma (later shown to have elements of choriocarcinoma within it). There was secondary spread to other organs and it was impossible to remove it all. We had very limited supplies of chemotherapeutic agents but

she was given what little we had over the course of the next few weeks. The cancer proved unresponsive and spread rapidly. She died within a few months.

Things aren't always what they seem to be. How often, however, do we jump to conclusions and rashly judge people by outward appearances? First impressions can be misleading. Reputations can so easily be irreparably tarnished and – as in this case – gross insult and humiliation added to injury by a hasty judgement.

In the Old Testament the prophet Samuel almost makes the same mistake. He was looking for a king for Israel. Several of Jesse's sons pass before him. He is ready to anoint any one of the first three, thinking 'surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord?'. God had to speak firmly and clearly to him. No, this was not the one. God reminded him, 'The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at outward appearances, God looks at the heart.' (1 Samuel 16: 6-12)

We need to make sure we are in possession of all the facts before we act. We need to be sure we see things from God's perspective and have 'the mind of Christ' before we speak out.

Peter Armon is CMF Overseas Support Secretary