Pharmacists cannot effectively function in isolation of other healthcare professionals in the healthcare arena. Medicine has become a team sport and pharmacists find themselves increasingly in defensive positions due to the functions we perform. We are the final safety net for prescribing health professionals. In this peculiar position however, pharmacists are oftentimes experienced as adversaries instead of teammates. Pharmacists also suffer the scorn of patients when we attempt to protect them against themselves. Along these lines, I have decided to share with you a few powerful communication tools that will make your attempts at persuading fellow healthcare professionals to follow your recommendations, a bit more effective and less confrontational. As long as you remind yourself that your recommendations are ethically founded and your actions are for the good of the patient and not purely manipulative, you will be successful in persuasion. The moment however you ignore these kind words of advice, you will invariably find yourself ridiculed and in a much less desirable position.

Believe in what you are saying. Psychologists have proven that individuals communicate only about a third through verbal communication. More than two thirds of communication takes place non-verbally and whenever a disconnect exists between the verbally communicated message and the non-verbal message, we will believe the non-verbal message and simply not believe what you are saying. Having read the leading opinion on persuasion and influence, Dr Robert Cialdini, Regents’ Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing at the US Arizona State University, whose opinion is highly regarded by international business leaders, we as pharmacists can do a lot worse than learn a few persuasion techniques from this highly acclaimed individual. As an experimental social psychologist, Cialdini identified how individuals he calls compliance professionals, manipulate others into doing, or saying, things they would otherwise not. Cialdini refers to weapons of influence – words and behaviours that help manipulate people into acting without thinking.

According to Cialdini, in the human world, people are more likely to do a favour for someone if the requestor offers a reason why they need it, even if it’s not a very good reason. This phenomenon is referred to as an automatic response trigger that develops in humans from well-learned psychological principles or stereotypes that have in the past been proven true. Because this process is automatic, no personal force or obvious persuasion is required to trigger an action. These triggers enable users thereof to manipulate people without the appearance of manipulation.

The rule of reciprocation is embedded in all cultures across the world. Simply put, when a favour is done for someone, that person is obligated to return the favour. Remember this next when you have assisted someone and you dismiss their gratitude with a “don’t mention it” answer. By acknowledging reciprocation through stating “I know if I ever needed your help, you would do the same” you literally bank reciprocity. In time, when you require support from the very same individual, the rule of reciprocation will make it virtually impossible for them not to comply as you requested.

People also have a powerful need to be seen as consistent in their thoughts and actions. One way to trigger this specific automatic response of consistency is to elicit a commitment of some kind. Commitments are most effective when they are active, public and require some effort. By asking an individual to publicly state commitment with a simple “will you…” before your request, you can bank on the action being followed through.

Another truth is that people will more likely emulate behaviours of those they perceive to be more similar to them. Selling a particular course of action as one commonly adapted by most healthcare professionals will make it very difficult for individuals not to comply. People are also more likely to be influenced by those they know and like. However unfair it appears to be, people tend to like others they find attractive, regard as similar, from whom they receive compliments and with whom they are familiar. People are generally so gullible that they will believe compliments about themselves even if it is not true.

People have an automatic response to authority as it helps facilitate an orderly, productive and well-structured society. This can be used as a means to convince people to think or do what they would normally not. Speaking from an informed and authoritative position, pharmacists are more likely to persuade other healthcare professionals of their views.

Finally, when something is seen as scarce, people want it more. The thought of losing something is actually more motivating than the idea of gaining something. When next you need to convince someone of your recommended course of action, it would be more readily accepted if you show what can be potentially lost, rather than focussing on the notions of what could be gained.

Being more sensitive to and noticing these different powers of persuasion, you will be much more successful in influencing others’ actions. Good luck in practising these principles to be more successful in your endeavours.