Increasing emphasis is being placed on the services that pharmacists provide. One of the most important services is the counselling of patients. The Good Pharmacy Practice (GPP) Manual\(^1\) states that every pharmacy must have at least one type of area for the furnishing of information and advice, including a separate room/area where communication can take place between a pharmacist and a patient in private (a private counselling and/or consultation area with a table and comfortable chairs). This article builds on this aspect by focusing on the positioning of chairs in the counselling area, and also focuses on seating arrangements when conducting meetings.

Although there is a general formula for the interpretation of seating positions, it must always be remembered that the environment and the social setting may have an influence on the positions chosen. The seating arrangements selected (or deliberately planned) convey silent yet powerful messages which can easily be overlooked or ignored. The principles discussed in this article are also practiced in negotiation processes.\(^3\) The aim is to assist you in deciding what is the best and most professional approach for you in the way that you want to run your pharmacy.

**THE COMPETITIVE/DEFENSIVE POSITION**

The competitive/defensive position is probably the most common layout for offices, counselling areas and consultation areas. Sitting across a table or desk from a person can, however, create a defensive, competitive atmosphere and can lead to each person taking a stand from his or her point of view because the table becomes a solid physical (and psychological) barrier between the two persons (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: Competitive/defensive position](image-url)

Although this position is regarded as defensive in business situations, it is the position in which waiters mostly seat two people in restaurants because it allows for good eye contact and makes conversation easier. Persons who are competing with each other, or if one person is reprimanding the other person, or if the person whose office it is wants to establish a superior/subordinate role, commonly use this seating arrangement in the work environment.

In an experiment conducted in doctors’ offices, the presence or absence of a desk had a significant effect on whether a patient was at ease or not.\(^2\) Only 10% of patients were at ease when a desk was present and the doctor sat behind it. This same principle must be taken into account in designing the layout of rooms...
the pharmacist’s counselling and consultation areas. The table or desk creates a barrier that will influence how patients perceive the communication.

**THE CORNER POSITION**

People who are engaged in friendly, casual conversation often use the corner or diagonal position (see Figure 2). It allows for good eye contact, the opportunity to use gestures and also to observe the gestures of the other person. The corner of the table or desk provides only a partial barrier and is useful if one of the persons begins to feel threatened, yet it avoids territorial division of the table.

**Figure 2: Corner position**

![Corner position diagram]

**THE COOPERATIVE POSITION**

The cooperative position, illustrated in Figure 3, is often used when two people are working together on a task, or when they think alike. People will sometimes spontaneously move their chairs into this position when they work together on an assignment and they know there is no time for power games or superiority. The position allows for good eye contact, and also gives the opportunity for mirroring. It projects an atmosphere of mutual trust and support. The only disadvantage is that one of the persons may feel that his or her personal space is being invaded.4

**Figure 3: Cooperative position**

![Cooperative position diagram]

A modified version of the cooperative position is when, for example, a third person (C) is called in. This position is known as “siding with the opposition”. This person can be seated as illustrated in Figure 4, and you (person A1) can remain where you are (creating the perception that you are “on the patient’s side”), or you can move to the side of the table (position A2).

**Figure 4: Siding with the opposition**

![Siding with the opposition diagram]

**THE INDEPENDENT POSITION**

People who do not want to interact or cooperate with each other use the independent position (see Figure 5). This position is often seen in restaurants, libraries or in public places. It has been said that people use this position when they are “diametrically opposite” to an idea. The position indicates lack of interest, indifference or hostility, and must be avoided if you want to have an open discussion.

**Figure 5: Independent position**

![Independent position diagram]

**KING ARTHUR’S CONCEPT**

King Arthur used the Round Table (illustrated in Figure 6) in an attempt to give each of his knights an equal amount of authority and status. A round table creates an atmosphere of relaxed informality and is ideal for discussion among people who are of equal status, since each person can claim the same amount of table territory. The circle as a symbol in itself symbolises unity and strength.

**Figure 6: King Arthur’s Concept**

![Round Table diagram]

King Arthur, however, did not take into account that if the status of one person in a group is higher than the others, it automatically alters the dynamics of group power. The king held the most power, therefore the knights seated on either side of him were silently granted the next highest amount of power, and the one on the right having more power than the one on the left. The power of the knights diminished relative to the distance that each of them was seated away from the king. The knight seated directly opposite King Arthur was therefore, in effect, in the competitive/defensive position and was likely to be the one that gave him the most trouble (the most likely to argue or be competitive).

**SEATING AROUND RECTANGULAR, SQUARE AND ROUND TABLES**

Many business executives nowadays have a rectangular desk in their office, as well as a round table.

The rectangular desk is usually the work desk, but is also used for business activity, brief conversations, or when reprimands must be given. As stated before, rectangular tables generally create a competitive or defensive relationship between people because each person has equal space, equal frontage and separate edges. Everyone can therefore take a “position” on a given topic.
Round tables (often associated with coffee tables) have wrap-around seating and create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. A round table is the most democratic shape of table since each person seated at it has an equal amount of territory, and there is no obvious dominant position if all the people around it are of equal status. If a leader or head is present, where he or she is sitting will otherwise unconsciously be deemed to be the head of the table.

Square tables, although not commonly used in the offices of business executives, are ideal for short, to-the-point conversations. Most co-operation normally comes from the person seated beside you, and the person on the right generally tends to be more co-operative than the person on the left. Most resistance normally comes from the person sitting directly opposite you. If four persons are seated around a square table, it therefore makes for interesting conversation dynamics since every person sits in both the competitive and corner positions.

Seating around a boardroom table is illustrated in Figure 7. Psychologically, when the leader is alone at the head of the table, he or she is “set apart” from the group. A boardroom table facilitates these power discrepancies, where, like oarsmen on a Roman galley, junior executives are all oriented toward the boss. The seat at the head of the table is also where body language can easily be sent and received (unlike the side of the table, where people have difficulty observing those next to them). Oval tables are often preferred to rectangular boardroom tables, because it is easier to see everybody around an oval-shaped table compared to a rectangular table.

Subordinates will traditionally fill the chairs around a boardroom table closest to the leader last, because affording more space to a leader is one of the basic conventions in body language. Traditionally, position A is therefore the seat of the person with the most influence, even if all people around the table are of equal status (provided that position A does not have his back facing a door). If A’s back was facing the door, the person seated at B would be the most influential and would also be strong competition for A.

If it is assumed that A is in the power position, person B will therefore have the next most authority, then D and then C (the middle of each side are the next most powerful seats). Positions A and B are perceived to be task-oriented while position D is seen as being occupied by an emotional leader (apparently often a woman) who is concerned about group relationships and getting people to participate. The seat to the right of A (position C) is also a very powerful position (the place where the “right-hand man/woman” of the leader sits). Depending on the situation, position B can sometimes represent the “opposition” and if there is a power struggle, supporters of B will normally sit close to position B.

If a person is aware of these seating arrangements, it makes it possible to influence power plays at meetings by placing name badges on the seats indicating where each person must sit and it gives the person chairing the meeting some degree of control over what happens in a meeting. A change in participation can often be observed if a shy and introverted person is suddenly put in a “power seat” in a meeting.

HOW TO SWITCH TABLE TERRITORIES

When two people sit directly opposite each other across a table (the competitive/defensive position), they subconsciously divide the table into two equal territories. Each person normally claims half as his/her own territory and will reject the other encroaching or intruding into it. In Figure 8 the paper is placed on the imaginary territorial line.

Figure 7: Power positions at a rectangular table

Figure 8: Territorial division of a table

Say, for example, you want to show the person sitting opposite you a picture of a new asthma inhaler or show one of your staff a summarised financial statement of the pharmacy. Where will you put the book or document? If you just put it on the table, the other person can respond in one of three ways: lean forward and look at it, take it over to his/her side, or push it back into your territory.

If the other person leans forward but does not pick it up, you will have to explain or present the contents because the message to you clearly is that he/she does not want you on his/her side of the desk. The best approach then is to angle your body at 45 degrees and present the contents to the other person. If the person takes the book or document over into his/her territory, it gives you the opportunity to ask permission to enter his/her territory and either of you can move into the corner or cooperative position. However, if the person just pushes the book or document back into your territory, you do not have permission to invade that person’s territory. The only way to obtain permission will be to directly ask the person (which may be negative).

IF THERE IS NO TABLE

Sometimes people prefer to have no barrier to communication between them. It is especially useful if you need to be both straight and frank with the person, as well as show empathy when needed during the conversation. Most psychologists will counsel their patients in this way.
If there is no table, the angles at which the chairs face and the way the body points, become important. There are three basic positions (see the three illustrations in Figure 9):

- **Sitting at a 45 degree angle**
  This gives a relaxed, informal atmosphere and is a good position for a counselling session. By mirroring movements and gestures, agreement can be shown. Agreement can also be indicated by pointing the body to a third point (to form a triangle).

- **Directly facing the other person**
  If you turn your chair and point your body directly towards the other person, you non-verbally tell them that you want direct answers to your direct questions. A serious atmosphere is created in this way.

- **Right 45 degrees away position**
  If you position your body 45 degrees away from the other person, you take pressure off the interview. It is the best position from which to ask sensitive or embarrassing questions. It encourages more open answers to your questions without the other person feeling that he or she is being pressurised.

**CONCLUSION**

There is a silent language or message in the seating arrangements that you use in your pharmacy when counselling patients and also when dealing with matters relating to the management of your pharmacy. If you want to increase your professionalism, you need to familiarise yourself with this “silent language”. Politics and power play are frequent occurrences in the business and professional world – the wise use of these subtle yet powerful techniques can afford you some control over difficult or uncomfortable situations.

**REFERENCES**