

Letter to Aromatic Thymes
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Dear editor,

I am writing to say how much I enjoyed reading the thoughtful article written by Kurt Schnaubelt in the last issue. I particularly liked his comments about "pseudo science" **yes, aromatherapy is absolutely crammed to bursting with that.**

Legal issues: Of course, what is legal in one country may not be in another. However, we must exercise a degree of commonness on such issues. It seems sensible to me, that if a particular essential oil is Internationally regarded as hazardous **for the intended use**, then we should respect that view. However, if we can prove that the data the decision is based on is incorrect, then we should do everything in our power to get the law overturned. Badly evaluated judgements of potential consumer hazards are currently becoming a real problem. This is because of the massive International attempts now being made to restrict the free availability of many herbal extracts. I am happy to accept such restrictions when they are based on sound evaluated scientific evidence, but this is far from the case at the moment. Some countries are placing restrictions on essential oils based on extremely unsound science, or even sometimes on unevaluated scientific opinion. "Well our expert advisers DRs x,y,z, are eminent professors of x,y,z, so they must know what they are talking about". **Not so**, frequently they operate on their biased belief rather than on sound facts. The fact that these supposed 'experts' are in the employ of, or get research grants from, the major pharmaceutical giants has of course nothing to do with their judgements!!!

On the question of what is illegal in one country may not be illegal in another. I have noticed that those essential oil traders who sell some of the most hazardous essential oils known, use this argument as a means to justify their continuing to sell dangerous oils. In fact all they are really interested in is making a few more bucks and to hell with the consequences on the individuals who suffer as the result.

Traditional uses: I disagree with suggestions that "cultural ties" to a particular essential oil or method of using it, should be given high priority. Unthinking and unevaluated culture and tradition are the curse of humankind. Firstly, you have to establish how long has this particular activity been going on. Nowadays it seems if you have been doing something for 10 years some people say "this is part of our culture". Secondly, as far as natural medicine is concerned, the fact that something has been used traditionally for even thousands of years does not inevitably mean that it is safe or effective.

Unfortunately within aromatherapy many ill informed people try and use the so called "traditional" use of essential oils to give the impression that the therapy is thousands of years old. **It is not**, it really is only about 30 years old. Please study the history of this trade as a specific therapy. It really started with the publication of M. Maurys book in 1961. This was followed by the English edition of Robert Tisserands book. The vast majority of this trade in the early days was founded around those two works.

Yes, essential oils have been used as traditional and mainstream medicines for hundreds of years. However, assuming that you can equate their mainly **internal use**, with its use now via massage, is the most fundamental error made by aromatherapy. As a herbalist I take account of the traditional use of herbs, but even then not without bringing to bear my knowledge of science in order to evaluate if the traditional use was correct or safe. Interestingly, as I am so interested in the Ancient uses of herbs, I have researched ancient texts and found many instances of major corruption for their uses in the last 100 years. Even such significant differences as the parts of the plant used in the past, are not always the same that are now used. This is generally not because modern herbalists have found new uses for the different parts, oh no, it is because some writer has

made a mistake about 100 years ago and this has been copied and proliferated ad infinitum. You aromatherapists should think very carefully about that one in view of the numerous errors in modern aromatherapy books. Perfumery yes, a very ancient history. Massage yes, an extremely ancient tradition. Applying highly purified and concentrated essential oils to the skin with massage **what tradition?**

Life force: As some of you know, I do not agree with Dr. Buchbauer on his experiments on skin absorption, however I wholeheartedly endorse his comments denigrating so called “**life force**” in essential oils. Can someone please explain how it is, that essential oils which we commonly take into our bodies in our food, can have special “life force” properties? If that were the case why don't we have a wonderful healthy population? Yet it is just those highly processed fast foods that we are told are bad, that are likely to contain more of those flavors made using essential oils. Why is it then that these foods are supposed to be so bad for you? Could it perhaps be that the animal fat energies fight a battle with the plant energies? If every essential oil is “unique” then how on earth can you attribute any degree of accurate therapeutic properties. Does this really mean that a Basil grown in Egypt will have totally different properties to one grown in Hungary? Now if you want to talk about the therapist somehow having some energetic, healing interaction with the essential oil, then I am prepared to listen. However, it is the **therapist** not the product they are working with.

Skin absorption: It is easy to perform a test to establish if that is a method by which significant amounts of essential oils get into the body via that route. I am now totally convinced that this is **not** what aromatherapy is all about. In the UK we tried to get funding from the Research Council for Complimentary Medicine for such a trial. However they felt unable to support it as “they had other important projects”. Being the eternal sceptic, I wonder if just might have been because if we were right, that it would have knocked a big hole in most aromatherapy training courses and the pronouncements of the trades founders. The question is not if aromatherapy works, but if the methods widely taught as fact are correct or not.

Safety: I agree with Kurt's ideas that it is wrong to say that certain oils “Should not be used at all”. However, you can't possibly expect the public or indeed many therapists, to know enough about hazardous essential oils to be able to exercise their own judgement. Therefore it is better to be safe than sorry. This point is made even more valid, when within our own trade, we have all these therapists who continue to use such oils with an extremely sound track record of hazardous effects such as: benzoin, cinnamon bark, tansy, sassafras, verbena, etc. let alone a whole range of oils whose adverse effects are totally undocumented. I have nothing against the use of any of these oils, but it must only be with the proviso that it is made Crystal clear that they must not be applied to the skin. One drop of Cinnamon bark oil is great in an apple pie, but on my skin, no way. So how do you balance public and therapists safety? Unfortunately many of the people who vehemently oppose wise restrictions on certain oils, do it not because they want everyone to have freedom of choice, but rather because they don't like it that it becomes public knowledge that they have been writing about and promoting hazardous practices for years.

In regard to the last paragraph, I can but draw your attention to the recent tobacco industry settlement. In other words don't think just because you changed to safer practices in the last few years that you are off the hook. My guess is, that if a court found that a practitioner had caused harm to a client because they had used substances which another far bigger trade had deemed hazardous for around 30 years, you would not have a leg to stand on. You can bet your life that any support from your insurance company would evaporate overnight in such circumstances.

So in conclusion, it's not a question of science versus aromatherapy. It is a question of using **good** science to help clean out the crap burdening a wonderful useful therapy.

Martin Watt (UK)

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