

**Notes on perfumes sold as 'essential oils'  
and on the people that sell them.  
By Martin Watt**

A similar version was published in the Aromatherapy quarterly. 1997. 54, 25-27.

**Many people that use essential oils are not well informed on the following:**

- 1) The chain of supply of essential oils.
- 2) The substantial volumes of aromatic materials supplied as "the genuine article" when they are not.
- 3) The convincing salespeople who sell phoney products as "the real thing".

I will try in this article, to introduce some information about the activities of certain perfume compound suppliers, and how selling these products as "essential oils" can have safety implications.

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Some essential oil salespeople give the impression that they are very knowledgeable about essential oils. In fact few have had any training in the botanical or medical sciences. Some have a background in fragrance companies as salesmen of perfume compounds; some have fake University degrees; many have set up kitchen sink operations without knowing anything! We all know that a good salesperson can sell some people anything. As someone who used to manage a sales office, I know that those producing highest sales were often not the honest ones, but were **those that were the best liars.**

**Since this article was first written, some of the "salespeople" referred to above have built up what now seem to very reputable companies. I and others in the trade know different of course. All I can say is beware of flashy looking web sites. These are often a sign that the owner is more into sales hype than selling good quality merchandise. Particularly beware of those who mislead you into thinking all their oils are organically grown. This is a pretty fair sign of a con artist at work.**

A few essential oils salespeople have trained on short complementary medicine courses. This enables them to appear very knowledgeable, when in fact their depth of knowledge about essential oils is superficial. I know people, who after taking part time courses of doubtful quality for a few months then call themselves "qualified herbalists". This title is then used as 'evidence of their knowledge' when promoting their essential oils. The course I qualified from to become a Herbalist lasted 3½ years full time, (similar training now gives a Degree). Even after that training, my knowledge on essential oils was still weak. My knowledge has accumulated after years of study and involvement in the trade. Therefore, never **assume** a complementary medicine qualification equips someone with a sound knowledge about essential oils - often the teachers themselves know next to nothing!

This problem of perfume salespeople selling so-called 'essential oils' is a significant problem for health food store proprietors. They cannot possibly have an adequate knowledge of all the products that they sell, and so they rely mainly on what the salespeople tell them. Such information in turn gets related to their own customers. Few aromatherapists have any idea of what real oils should cost, but independent shopkeepers often do not have a clue about trade prices for genuine oils.

The large companies that supply synthetic fragrance blends know perfectly well, what they are selling. However, these perfume compounds are intended to be greatly diluted in various

commercial products such as perfumes, cosmetics, soaps, & detergents. When these same products enter the aromatherapy supply chain, it raises all sorts of safety and ethical issues that I will now discuss.

### ETHICAL ISSUES:

- a) If a perfume compound is marketed as an "essential oil" from plants then this is a lie.
- b) If an essential oil is marketed as "extracted from the named plants" and yet it contains some synthetic chemicals, then the product is no longer 'natural'.
- c) If an essential oil has been '**compounded**' by assembling fractions of cheaper essential oils, it may still be 'natural' but it is not from the plant named on the bottle.
- d) If a pure essential oil has been '**extended**' by using various solvents, then it is no longer a product from 'the named plant'.
- e) If an essential oil is marketed as shall we say Ylang No. 1, and yet it is in fact third grade, then this is clearly dishonest. **It is extremely common to find low grades of essential oils sold as so called 'premier grades'**.
- f) Dishonest traders can damage the businesses of ethical traders by substantially undercutting the honest traders prices. This is because far bigger profits can be made by buying fragrance compounds or low grade essential oils, and reselling them as top quality products.

**All the above plus more, are rife in the aromatherapy oils supply trade.**

### SAFETY ISSUES:

The majority of REAL essential oils have been extensively tested for toxicological and dermal adverse effects. We know what safe levels of use are, we know which oils are hazardous and we know which need care with use.

Fragrance compounds containing synthetic chemicals are produced for many different products. The most important feature of these fragrance blends is that they tend to have a very potent fragrance. They are intended to be used in commercial products at **extremely low levels of use**. It must be taken into consideration, that in aromatherapy massage, relatively high volumes of these chemicals are rubbed all over the body and at this level of use, health problems are feasible.

Chemicals in common with essential oils, can be purchased in a number of different **grades**. It is not uncommon to find that the chemicals used to compound fragrances contain relatively high levels of impurities. While the action of the individual chemical may be known, the potential side effects of the impurities it contains are poorly documented. Essential oils sold with the prime objective of deceiving the consumer are most likely to be of the lowest possible quality.

The **external application** of these impure chemicals may not result in significant problems, however, if someone were tempted into taking this material as a medicine, then we are in an entirely different ball game. It is this aspect of the activities of con artists in our trade that is so serious. If a salesperson convinces a customer that the essential oils they are offering are "pure", "organic", etc. when in fact they contain chemical impurities, **they are risking peoples health**.

Many pure essential oils have been used internally as medicinal agents for around 200 years. If someone is convinced that what they have got is REAL, then it is perfectly reasonable that some people will ignore what the label says, and take the oil internally. Such internal use of compounds containing chemical impurities adds a heavier burden to the bodies existing stock of toxic substances such as dioxin's and organophosphate's, with potentially catastrophic long-term effects.

Ask your trade associations what public advice they have issued, to warn people about the dangers of using aromatherapy grade essential oils as internal medication?

Ask your trade association what verifiable sources of safety information they use and are their teachers required to provide referenced information to new students?

### **So, what can be done to inhibit the activities of the unscrupulous?**

In the UK our Trading Standards departments have had samples of essential oils analysed. Yet few prosecutions have resulted from them finding fake oils on sale. I tell students, that "if they are unhappy about the genuineness of their oils, to take them to their local trading standards department, but don't hold your breath to see the trader in court"!

Trading standards departments need to be supplied with information on who they can get to analyse the oils correctly. The aspect of **correct analysis** is critically important. Many essential oils are manufactured so expertly, that only a trade analyst with great experience and who knows the cost of substitute chemicals can determine the phoney essential oil from the genuine. However, most such experts are in the employ of the companies manufacturing the oils.

Unfortunately in the UK, the definition in law of what constitutes the term 'natural' is somewhat woolly. Other countries however have successfully tackled that problem and defined in law what the term 'natural' should mean.

Most countries have governmental systems in place designed to prevent fraud. If a salesperson has implied that their product is the genuine article and it is not, then this is FRAUD. Therefore, if you own a shop, or retail essential oils, ask for written confirmation that the oils supplied are genuine. **Never ever, accept a salespersons word.** I am sick of the number of times on aromatherapy newsgroups I have seen people say "I trust my supplier". This trust has often been built up by efficient order handling; customer relations and sales hype, NOT by knowing if the oils are the real deal or not.

If you are in a shop and you hear an assistant advise a customer on the internal use of essential oils, then don't be afraid to interrupt. Ask for confirmation of the assistant's qualifications and on their ability to prove that their oils are suitable for internal consumption.

Ask your trade publications why it is, that when dishonest essential oil traders are sent to prison for fraud. That no mention appears in any of the aromatherapy journals?

Ask your **trade publications** why it is, that they will not publish articles by people with the ability to prove how widespread misinformation is on essential oils. Are these journals there to protect trade business interests, rather than you and your clients?

Ask your **trade associations** what precautions they have taken, to prevent therapists from being educated by ill-informed salespeople. These people will and do lie or embroider the truth in order to sell their products?

Only with increased knowledge on how to go about challenging the con-merchants in aromatherapy, can we hope to inhibit governments around the world from stopping the free availability of our wonderful GENUINE essential oils.

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