

HOW TO SPOT HYPE AND CONFIDENCE TRICKSTERS IN AROMATHERAPY

By Martin Watt

A lecture written for a NAHA conference that ultimately I refused to attend.

See also related letter added [at the foot](#)

The following is a review of the misleading information endemic within aromatherapy.

All my efforts over the years have been targeted at trying to introduce truth into the trade. Unfortunately, there are many people who simply cannot tolerate truth. They are the ones who claw their way to influential positions of power where they actively suppress any dissent in the ranks. **These are the people that most of you support**, therefore my influence has had to be as a rat scurrying around nipping their toes from time to time. Which I should add I take the greatest delight in.

In the following, you will read some of the harshest condemnations of aromatherapy training and quality standards that has ever been publicly voiced. At the end of it you may get the impression that I think aromatherapy is a load of hyped up rubbish and has no use. Please, please let me correct that before I start. I think aromatherapy is a wonderful healing therapy and for certain conditions there is no other therapy that is as effective. However, it is crammed to bursting with unjustifiable hype, as well as a good number of liars, cheats and even a few criminals.

Some historical facts which lead us onto examining how this trade has developed.

1. Aromatherapy as practised now, is a NEW therapy (around 30 years old), I emphasis **new** before someone says what about the ancient Egyptians? As far as we know they did not have distilled essential oils, or the highly concentrated aromatic extracts that are now used. **Therefore, most of the material published in aromatherapy books is not based on a therapy that has any significant roots unlike herbal medicine.**
2. The vast majority of the early writers on aromatherapy had little sound knowledge of the sciences or technical issues surrounding the manufacture and use of plant based medicines.
3. Few of those early authors had received any training in the medical sciences.
4. Very few - if any - had received any sound training in herbal medicine.
5. Several early authors were closely associated with the beauty therapy trade.
6. When ones studies the works of the early authors, the trained eye can quickly spot the numerous errors they make. This is particularly noticeable in relation to phytochemistry and the claimed therapeutic properties. The only early author in our trade I have any respect for is Gateffosse. However, even his book requires quite a good knowledge of essential oils chemistry to realise that most of the time he was using terpeneless oils, not the whole oil as most people think.

In reality, it is the beauty therapy trade that underlies much of aromatherapy teachings to this day. This means that the beauty trade, which is and has always been, packed to bursting with hype and lies, has placed a huge burden on aromatherapy.

Most of you are aware that numerous expert dermatologists have stated that a cheap five dollar pot of cold cream is just as effective for moisturising the skin as a pot costing 100 dollars. Yet, people still insist on purchasing the most expensive product. In other words, **most people like to live in a fantasy world.** That is what the beauty therapy, cosmetics and perfume trade pander to,

as do many suppliers and educators in aromatherapy. They tell people what they know they want to hear NOT THE TRUTH. In other words, "tell them it will take 40 years off the age of their skin and we will make a bomb". Because of the beauty trade background of aromatherapy, that type of attitude is what pervades our therapy like an invasive, seemingly unstoppable cancer.

You people have been told a pack of lies by many authors and particularly the suppliers of your raw materials. Nowadays lies are called "good marketing". Sorry, but in my philosophy of life, lies are lies.

Now we must again look at the beauty trade. If you are told a particular product or treatment will make your skin look younger and it does not, OK it's a lie, but it will not cause you much harm other than to your pocket. We should never ever forget that aromatherapy is targeted at treating HEALTH PROBLEMS. In my opinion, it is dishonest to suggest that certain essential oils can cure medical conditions, when there is not a hope of them doing what is claimed.

This kind of dishonesty is also endemic in the aromatherapy trade. Sometimes it is just slightly misleading, but in other cases, it is criminally dishonest.

I can back everything I say, because for years, I have been collecting the course notes of some of the biggest names in the trade and some of the claims made are simply horrifying.

In the course notes of a leading British teacher we have these statements:

"Melaleuca quinquenervia is used for; coronaritis, endocarditis, viral hepatitis, gastro and duodenal ulcers, biliary lithiasis, cholera, tuberculosis, cancer of the rectum"

So where are the references to these wonderful properties, sorry there are NONE.

"Origanum majorana. Indications: (transcutaneous route)-Hyperthyroidism".

A serious condition, again references - NONE.

On contraindications we have: "none known at physiological doses".

So what the heck does that mean, a reference, you got to be joking!

I have numerous such examples of utterly unscrupulous and dangerously misleading nonsense from some of the best-known names in this trade. I won't bore you with more I could fill a book. However, when one examines the origin of this type of nonsense it generally traces back to 2 or 3 French aromatherapy teachers. Believe me I have nothing against the French, but just a few individuals there are responsible for a lot of the utter trash taught in aromatherapy on therapeutics, chemistry and safety.

From the course of a leading figure present at this conference:

"Aldehydes are anti-inflammatory".

This generalisation is a potentially dangerous statement. While some aldehydes may have this property, certainly not all of them do. There are hundreds of aldehydes with widely differing properties. For example, cinnamic aldehyde in cinnamon bark oil is a powerful irritant and sensitising agent. Therefore, it can not possibly be considered anti-inflammatory.

From the course notes of a well known (in aromatherapy), French doctor:

"Alcohol's do not irritate the skin".

A far too general statement. What is important is WHICH alcohol and in which essential oil. Cinnamic alcohol can be a very potent irritant, so how the heck can it be classed as non-irritant?

"Eucalyptol is well tolerated by the skin".

This chemical has only been tested on humans at up to 16%, it occurs at extremely high levels in common Eucalyptus oils, and yet this writer advocates later in his notes the use of the NEAT OIL. The variety E.smithii which he recommends; has not been subjected to any formal testing on humans for any adverse effects.

CINNAMON BARK OIL: The daily dose of oil recommended **rectally** in 'gellules' is equal to 1600 mg. this is equivalent to aprox. 1440 mg. of Cinnamaldehyde.

The World Health Organisation recommends the average daily intake(A.D.I) for Cinnamaldehyde should not exceed 0.7mg./kg. For an average 70 kg. man this would equate to 49 mg. maximum daily. Martindales pharmacopoeia recommends a maximum dose of the oil as 200 mg. If given 3 times a day, this equals 600 mg.

Therefore, if this advice were followed of 1-200mg. administered up to 8 times daily, this would give a maximum daily dose of 1600 mg. of oil **equivalent to 29 times the maximum recommended safe level of the W.H.O. or 2.6 time higher than the maximum recommended dose in Martindale.**

HOW TO SPOT SOME OF THE CONS:

"I am a qualified nurse"

Many of you and the public, seem to think that this means the individual concerned must be extremely knowledgeable about medicine and aromatherapy. Not so, there are huge variations around the world in nurses training. I have even known people, who when it was checked, had only been ward assistants and had no nursing training at all. There are various grades of 'nurse'. Some of the lower grades involves very little training in the medical sciences, while at the top end you get nurse practitioners who are as competent as doctors. Which leads on nicely to:

"I am a doctor".

You should always ask a doctor of what? In aromatherapy, we have several people who use the title doctor, to give people the impression that they are medically qualified. Are they a doctor of industrial chemistry, I know of at least three leading names in our trade that are just that. Are they a doctor of philosophy, religion, politics, **or indeed have they any such qualification.** Yes, there are some leading figures in our trade that obtained a doctorate by attending a course for a few days in Sri Lanka which had nothing to do with aromatherapy.

Lets say for arguments sake that the individual did train as a medical doctor at some stage. Fine, at least they should have a knowledge of medicine, but that certainly does not mean they have an adequate knowledge of essential oils. In that regard, there are some well-known names in France whose course notes and writings indicate an appallingly inadequate knowledge of safety. The same individuals also clearly have not got a sound understanding of the chemistry of essential oils, or a sound knowledge of a significant part of their medicinal properties.

While I am on this subject, do not be mislead by those that claim aromatherapy is widely practised by medical doctors in France, this simply is not true and is just another example of aromatherapy hype. My investigations have indicated that of the few doctors in France that use essential oils, most do it in private practice, not within the French health care system.

"I have a degree in aromatherapy"

Well that's news to me. In the UK, we have a degree course in complementary therapies run by Exeter University. This course was never intended to equip students to be fully-fledged practitioners of any one therapy. Instead, it was an introduction to complementary health care treatments. Other Universities may be offering degrees soon, but the quality of the education they provide on aromatherapy is highly questionable. This is because these Universities assume people

they involve themselves with in our trade know what they are talking about. Sorry, but is just NOT TRUE!

So, unless you want to be fooled, (many don't seem to care), do not accept peoples qualifications on face value, especially if you want them to teach your students.

"I learnt all my knowledge from French doctors".

If the individual who says this tries to give you the impression that they are therefore extremely knowledgeable on essential oils and medicine, this is possibly a sign of a con artist, but most certainly is a sign of someone who does not have the ability to assess the worth of what they have been taught. There are many people in aromatherapy who simply regurgitate everything they have been taught without a second thought. Indeed such people comprise the vast majority of aromatherapy teachers and authors.

"We grow all our own plants and distil them".

Classic sales hype that one. Since when did sandalwood trees grow in France, or Ylang trees grow in the USA, or Ravensara 'wild' grown in France? I have seen this all on the literature from certain essential oil suppliers. Where are the huge fields of aromatic plants that are needed to produce commercial quantities of most oils?

"We don't grow them all ourselves, but we inspect all the people that grow the plants for us."

I have a simple answer to that, it is hype!

"All our oils come only from organically grown or wild plants".

In the majority of cases this is hype. The International essential oil trade is a massive agricultural business. In any case, there is no sound evidence that such organically grown essential oils are any better than those grown on a commercial scale. Indeed, in many cases they will not be of such good olfactory quality if they have been stewed in old copper stills 'on the farm'. If you want to support organic growers, that is a very fine thing to do, but please do try and get some evidence that you are not just throwing your money into a con artist suppliers pocket.

Another good indication of someone who is out to mislead is a business card which is packed with impressive looking initials. This always sets alarm bells ringing in my head. Particularly so when who can't work out what the heck they mean.

Using religion to sell products, i.e., Gary Young and his mob of con artists: This is about the closest you can get to the old fashioned quacks who used to roam around the USA often selling phoney cures. "I am an instrument being used by god to bring you his wonderful creations". As far as I am concerned such people should be locked up and the key thrown away. I am quite sure, if Jesus came to an aromatherapy conference, he would overturn the tables of the purveyors of sham products and seize the cash made by the money grabbing con artists.

The next one is not so much how to spot a con, as how to spot someone who does not have a clue about what they are selling. It is suppliers who sell lily of the valley, apple blossom, strawberry, musk, etc. and in their literature describe them as 'essential oils'. Many of you will of course know that these are all synthetic. If the musk is real then it will cost a fortune and the trade is illegal anyway.

AROMATHERAPY ASSOCIATIONS:

In recent years, most aromatherapy trade associations have been desperately trying to improve their public image and sphere of political influence. This has been done by proclaiming publicly "our registered therapists have to abide by stringent codes of conduct". Yet, I have assembled a small mountain of evidence on leading members of British trade associations proving beyond doubt that they set rules for others and then ignore them themselves. This even spills over into legal issues, these individuals have the nerve to advise others on how to comply with the laws

associated with our trade, and then their own companies blatantly flout the law.

"We are setting high standards of education". Well how can they do that when so few of their teachers have got the first clue about the subjects they are teaching?

"Being a member of our association protects the public against badly trained therapists and rogue sales practices". This is HYPE-some of the most dangerous practices I can think of are undertaken by members of most aromatherapy trade associations and many companies selling phoney goods and services are also members.

AROMATHERAPY BOOKS AND COURSES:

Look at any course notes you had during your training. Do they contain any references to justify claims like: "German chamomile is anti inflammatory", "lavender is a relaxant", "tea tree kills bacteria". If you see no references to scientific papers justifying such claims, then your course provider has not bothered to spend time and money on investigating their therapy before embarking on teaching the subject. Most of the course notes I provide are fully referenced, but I have masses of course notes from many so called 'leading schools' that do not contain a single reference on such major issues as safety and therapeutics.

Likewise with books-where are the references? are the references valid?

Are you given enough information to be able to go to a library, obtain original research papers yourself, and check what you are told? In this respect, we have had several books recently published where extensive references are given, but when checked, we find the references have nothing to do with essential oils, but are from research conducted on herbal extracts.

Now that people are running out of ideas on books just on aromatherapy, we are beginning to see people 'inventing' new concepts attempting to unite the use of essential oils with other more ancient therapies. Yet, when we look at the authors what do we find - they have themselves trained on 'jack of all trades, master of non' courses. Take for example Chinese herbal medicine; to do the most basic training takes a minimum of two years of dedicated hard study, plus clinical experience under the supervision of highly experienced practitioners. Yet, people are writing on this subject, whose knowledge-base on both Chinese traditional medicine as well as aromatherapy is appallingly inadequate,

Many of your icons have built their reputation on a constant flow of books, which are not much better than novels. Many course providers have then constructed their courses around these books. The aromatherapy organisations then base their examinations on them.

Again look at your course notes and see if in the bibliography you have a whole string of aromatherapy books listed, rather than books published on essential and fixed oils, plant chemistry, medicine, etc.

FINALLY:

People often say to me "well if you know so much, why don't you help these organisations set better standards". The short answer is I refuse to associate myself with con artists. All I can do is keep prodding at the members of these associations until they get fed up, and have a purge of the dead wood and criminals who are deeply entrenched within aromatherapy. Personally, I have the gravest doubts that this will happen. Therefore, my efforts are being directed at constructing an alternative system that those honest people who care deeply about our therapy may wish to participate in. In the mean time I will do everything within my limited means, to discredit and destroy the corrupt organisations and individuals that the majority of you people support.

Martin Watt

To the Aromatherapy Quarterly 1998-Not published

Dear Editor,

Currently, certain individuals in the AOC and ATC are squealing like stuck pigs because of mine and other people's recent articles in your journal. They are even attacking Alan Barker for publicly declaring that his project failed due to the poor quality essential oil he was unknowingly using. How dare they attack such truthful statements, have they never heard of something called freedom of speech. I have always encouraged open discussion about the important issues surrounding aromatherapy education and essential oils quality.

At last with the advent of the internet (beyond the trades censorship), are aromatherapists beginning to realise what a lot of hype and nonsense has been promoted by leading individuals in this trade. All covered up and endorsed by the trade associations of course. Rarely in the various articles I have written in publications around the world, have any of my challenges in regard to poor quality of education in aromatherapy been adequately answered by the AOC in particular.

Recently in a letter from Sylvia Baker, I have been accused of putting forward my own business interests in my articles. I think your readers should therefore be made aware of the following:

1. I have not inserted the text on my business activities in any recent articles. The text has been inserted by the editors concerned, simply to let people know what I do, as is common practice.
2. My income from my research, writing and teaching activities is so low, that I have little to lose now if the traders boycott my publications. I mention this, because I know that due to the complete failure of the associations to restrict entry to this trade, that many therapists are in a similar position to myself only making a tiny income. Indeed many of my past customers have dropped out of the trade because they cannot earn enough money to keep afloat. This is mainly due to the market continually being flooded by 'certified' therapists from the numerous rubbish courses.
3. In comparison to the above, most of the individuals running the larger companies supplying essential oils, and several of the major training schools, spend weeks and in some cases months, swanning around the world to conferences and exhibitions. Who pays for that-you the aromatherapists with your low income do. So perhaps my next article should be on the subject of the high profit margins made by selling aromatherapy products and services of doubtful quality.

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