


George Smith examines a popular alternative therapy

Aromatherapy



KEY POINTS

Modern aromatherapy arose in the early 20th century and is an increasingly popular alternative therapy involving the application of aromatic oils, usually to the skin. The use of aromatic oils in relaxing massage is quite legitimate, but this use needs to be distinguished from their employment by New Age practitioners who attribute their 'healing' properties to 'balancing energy flows'. Systematic reviews do not so far support aromatherapy's therapeutic efficacy. Although some sickness may indeed require 'spiritual' treatment, for Christians, this should be based on biblical guidelines and led by God's Holy Spirit. Examination from both medical and Christian perspectives indicates that aromatherapy is not generally to be recommended.

Amongst the 150 or more alternative therapies available today, aromatherapy is high on the popularity list. There are over 6,000 aromatherapists in UK with varying amounts of training and experience.¹ Recently the *Daily Telegraph* reported that women were spending £670 million a year on various spiritual therapies; massage techniques such as aromatherapy were in the top five best sellers.²

It is important to distinguish between the valid use of aromatic oils in cosmetics, perfumes and medicines, and holistic aromatherapy as a healing technique. Some products (such as lavender sachets and perfumed candles) may be labelled 'aromatherapy' but are not significant elements of holistic aromatherapy.

Aromatherapy aims to promote and maintain holistic good health by the correct use and application of so-called essential oils obtained from plants. These are usually applied by massage. The word *aromatherapy* is something of a misnomer as its practice is not exclusively dependent upon effect on olfactory nerves. A more precise term would be *aromatic oils therapy*.

Origins

Aromatic oils were widely used in ancient Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Indian and Roman civilisations for cosmetics, fumigation, embalming as well as medicines and religious rituals. Perfumes and medicines were prepared in temples and there was a Greek temple of aromatherapy.³ Aromatic substances were burnt to appease gods and channel divine knowledge. The Greeks ascribed divine origins to aromatic plants. The word *perfume* is

derived from the Latin *per* (through) and *fumus* (smoke).⁴ Breathing in wood and resin aromas was believed to drive out demons. Hippocrates (460-370 BC) commended aromatic baths to prolong life and Pliny (AD 23-79) recorded therapeutic aromatic oil massages.⁵ In the Middle Ages, incense and aromas were used during rituals, as perfumes and disinfectants, especially during plagues.

In biblical times, frankincense, spikenard and myrrh were used for anointing, incense and other religious rituals – quite unlike current holistic aromatherapy. The Good Samaritan's oil was more likely to have been olive oil than an aromatic preparation.⁶

Recent developments

Present day aromatherapy can be traced back to the work of Professor R M Gattefosse who first used the term *aromatherapie* as the title of his 1928 book. His theories were based on personal experience: following a laboratory explosion, he plunged his injured hand into lavender oil and obtained immediate pain relief and rapid healing.⁷

During World War II, French army surgeon Jean Valnet was impressed with the value of aromatic oils in wound treatment and began using them more widely with psychiatric, diabetic, tuberculosis and cancer patients. The use of dilute aromatic oils by massage (rather than orally with potentially serious side effects) was popularised by Austrian born chemist Marguerite Maury: she used two to three percent dilutions in plant oils (such as olive and almond) on the skin.⁸

Robert Tisserand (founder of the Tisserand Institute for Research and Education in 1969)

introduced aromatherapy to Britain. His book, *The Art of Aromatherapy* is a standard reference book. UK aromatherapists usually belong to one of several associations; there is a register but no current statutory requirements.

Essential oils

Essential oils are highly concentrated substances (such as clove and bergamot) extracted by expression, absorption or distillation from plants and trees. They are labelled essential as they are considered to have a particular, essential relationship with their parent plant. Implications that they are essential for good health are unjustified. Prominent aromatherapists, however, believe that they contain essential vital force, life energy or universal cosmic energy, which have New Age and Eastern religious and cultural associations. Tisserand maintains, 'Natural aromatic substances are better than artificial ones which do not contain any life force'.⁹

In *Practical Aromatherapy*, Penny Rich concludes, 'Essential oils are so complex and magical that no one knows what they are. Romantics and enthusiasts say they are the life force of the plants similar to the human spirit. Researchers say they are mixtures of organic compounds such as ketones, terpenes, esters, alcohols, aldehydes and other molecules too small and complex to classify under a microscope'.¹⁰

Essential oils are recommended for many conditions, ranging from asthma to cancer and tuberculosis. Therapeutic indices, apparently based on tradition and experience, list up to 200 medical conditions that may benefit from one of approximately 150 oils.

Medical checklist

How are they said to work?

There does not appear to be a rational scientific basis for this therapy. It is described as working by releasing neuro-chemicals, balancing hormones, stimulating the immune system, reducing toxins or influencing psycho-neuro-immunology; little explanation or scientific evidence is offered. Others claim that benefits depend upon balancing the bodies' vital energy, cosmic energy or life force. Gattefosse stated: 'Essential oils can be used to balance the energy flows of the body in a similar way to acupuncture'.¹¹ Tisserand also maintained that aromatherapy was based on the same principles as acupuncture, herbal medicine and homeopathy - the balancing of life force or ch'i (yin and yang). He felt that aromatic oils were yin or yang in effect with astrological associations influenced by their ruling planets.¹² Some therapists use astrology and pendulum swinging as diagnostic and therapeutic aids.

Do they work?

The wide range of practices and techniques employed, from bath oils through to massage treatments, complicates the process of assessing

aromatherapy's efficacy. In addition, dosage by most of these methods must surely be imprecise.

Few clinical trials have been attempted but Professor Ernst's *Desktop Guide to Complementary Therapies* includes two systematic reviews that do not reveal any conclusive evidence for efficacy.¹³ A Consumers' Association investigation found, '...little evidence that the use of essential oils for massage provides any greater benefits than a pleasant smell'.¹⁴

Are they safe?

Professor Ernst recommends that these oils should not be taken internally or used undiluted on the skin.¹⁵ Severe reactions can occur. Some oils have carcinogenic potential and others may cause photosensitive reactions. General allergic reactions, nausea and headaches have been reported. Some therapists warn against use in diabetes, epilepsy, hypertension, skin problems, pregnancy and cardiovascular conditions. More importantly, it can be dangerous to use an unproven therapy when effective orthodox treatment is available but rejected.

Christian checklist

The lack of scientific evidence for the efficacy of holistic aromatherapy, together with its potential side effects, indicates that it can hardly be used with integrity. Some therapists' diagnostic measures include pendulum swinging, divination and astrology, which are strictly forbidden in the Bible.¹⁶

Many aromatherapists associate holistic aromatherapy with the theories of life force, vital energy, meridians and chakras, all of which are rooted in Taoist, Hindu and other eastern philosophies and religions. Many alternative therapies are associated with New Age ideology and healing, based on the idea that God is a universal force or energy rather than the Christian belief in a personal God and Heavenly Father.

Conclusion

Careful distinction needs to be made between the legitimate use of aromatic oils and holistic aromatherapy. The popular idea of aromatherapy as a relaxing massage using pleasant, fragrant oils is very different from the holistic aromatherapy of leading exponents such as Tisserand, Rich and Price.

Claims that aromatherapy is effective in the treatment of sicknesses that have spiritual overtones (such as anxiety, depression, fear and guilt) raise serious questions for Christians.¹⁷ Spiritual sickness may indeed require treatment with a spiritual dimension; yet, for Christians, this should be based on biblical guidelines and led by God's Holy Spirit. Examination from both medical and Christian perspectives indicates that aromatherapy is not to be recommended.

'Walk as children of light...proving what is acceptable unto the Lord.' (Ephesians 5:8,10 KJV)

George Smith is a Demotologist and former GP in Berkshire

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