

MARKETING ISSUES SURROUNDING THE SALE OF ESSENTIAL OILS

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There is legislation both UK & EEC covering the sale and supply of essential oils. Increasingly E.E.C. legislation is replacing our own, but that is the subject of a different article. However, not all of these regulations apply to every trade that needs to use essential oils in their products. The definition of what can or cannot be supplied or used, rests largely with the intended final use of the oil concerned.

As far as Medicinal use is concerned, most people in the UK should by now be aware that most essential oils may not be retailed for treating specific health problems without a medicines license. What constitutes 'medicinal use' is defined under the UK 1968 Medicines Acts as well as in several pieces of EEC law.

It is important for our trades future to examine the differences between:

1. Illegal sale.

2. Inadvisable or unethical sale.

1. This will depend on each countries legislation. For example, the only essential oils that are prohibited for resale to the public in the UK are: Chenopodium (American wormseed), savin oil and croton oil. These oils may only be distributed to the medical profession from licensed pharmaceutical premises. Despite those restrictions having been in place since 1968, at least two well-known companies in aromatherapy were selling American wormseed oil openly until about the mid 1990s.

Another oil that is 'effectively' banned in cosmetic products is sassafras oil. By 'effectively' banned this is because the E.E.C. only permit safrol in products at below at 100 ppm. Since raw sassafras oil contains about 870,000 p.p.m. of safrole, this means that in aromatherapy you would have great difficulty in diluting the oil to a safe and LEGAL level of use.

2. The differences between inadvisable and unethical sale are a grey area.

There are a number of essential oils which represent significant hazards if inappropriately used by a member of the public, or a badly trained therapist. Therefore, we need to examine the wisdom of whether such oils should be supplied at all, or if, provided they are ethically marketed, potential risks are slight.

In the case of aromatherapy where skin application is likely, then my belief is that it is **unethical** to market and supply any know hazardous essential oil without appropriate warnings. I am here thinking about oils like **expressed bergamot, benzoin, cinnamon bark, expressed lime, verbena**, etc. In such cases, the safety data is crystal clear; such oils should not be applied to human skin. This safety data is backed by International research organisations such as RIFM and IFRA who advise their large member companies on safety issues of raw materials.

The legal position of anyone that supplies, or uses such oils without appropriate warnings requires examination. There is little doubt that if someone used an essential oil with well-documented hazards - in the volume that is the norm in aromatherapy - and then their client suffered from a side effect. Such a client would have an extremely powerful legal case to argue. If the harmed individual can prove that a major research organisation such as RIFM, has advised the large fragrance companies against the use of such materials for many years, they will have a strong case. A court might deem it 'unreasonable', for an aromatherapy supplier to sell such material without adequate

warnings. It would probably also be deemed 'unreasonable', for a therapist to use the material contrary to the practice of the International fragrance trade that DOES understand safety issues. In my opinion if they did this, then their insurance company would very likely refuse to stand by them and cover any subsequent damages awarded.

Unfortunately, there are still many companies in the aromatherapy business, that supply such hazardous products without any significant warnings, and many others whose warnings are inadequate.

Some suppliers try and hide behind their policy of only supplying hazardous oils to "trained therapists". Well, as someone who has been deeply involved in publishing and teaching on safety issues for many years, I can tell you that policy is utterly fallacious. The fact a therapist is trained in our industry most certainly does not mean they have been equipped with adequate safety data. If they had been, then the oils I mentioned above would not have formed part of the tuition requirements of many aromatherapy courses for years.

THE TRADE HYPE

The people in aromatherapy who promote the use of essential oils with well-documented side effects, often try and hide behind "well we have used this oil for 20 years and never seen a problem". My arguments against this are as follows:

1. Aromatherapy does not have a centralised data collection system such as the yellow card system used by doctors. Therefore, no one is certain of the percentages of clients and therapists that get adverse reactions to essential oils.
2. The huge majority of aromatherapists do not treat enough people to be able to obtain accurate statistical information.
3. If a client has a mild adverse reaction following a massage, the chances are they simply will not go back to the therapist concerned and so the reaction is undocumented.
4. Adverse reactions to essential oils do indeed occur, but are mainly to the therapists themselves. I have had several aromatherapists contact me for advice about a variety of skin problems caused by essential oils. In at least two cases they have undergone clinical dermal sensitisation testing that confirmed sensitisation to certain oils. Such cases rarely get reported to the trade associations and so again statistical data is being lost.
5. Others promote the use of hazardous oils because "medical doctors in France use it all the time". They simply fail to appreciate that registered doctors in most countries are legally free to use whatever substance for their patients that they wish. Aromatherapists are not registered doctors or anything like adequately trained in clinical medicine. Yet despite that, some aromatherapists do a little training with these doctors in France, or take courses run by their followers. These aromatherapists then go away and merrily start using essential oils in the same manner that the Doctor has shown them, without a second thought about their own legal position. Don't be fooled by thinking your insurance policy covers you. Insurance companies are notorious for trying to get out of paying a claim in any way they can. If there was the slightest hint that you had done something contrary to "accepted trade good practice" they will use that to get themselves off the hook.
6. In certain cases, such as the application of Verbena oil to the skin, the adverse effects are unequivocal. If aromatherapists have used so called 'verbena' oil regularly and seen no adverse reactions, then the question must be asked, "were they using pure, natural, unmodified verbena". I would bet the answer is no, despite what the supplier/s says.

My opinions on unethical and inadvisable trade practice's.

I deem it unethical to sell to the public any essential oils with well-documented side effects, without providing scientifically verifiable and clear safety information.

I deem it inadvisable to sell the same oils to aromatherapists without clear concise warnings.

I deem it unethical to sell to anyone for skin application, essential oils that have not undergone Internationally acceptable safety testing on humans. I deem it scandalous when such untested oils are promoted and sold for internal consumption. I can only accept such sales when clear instructions are given that the product should not be used on the skin or internally. In this category we have the seemingly unceasing supply of so called 'chemotype' oils, which have only been used by a mere handful of people compared with our tried and tested oils.

I believe that only **unscrupulous traders** will have oils like cinnamon bark, rue, saffron, tansy, thuja, verbena, etc. available in the same lists that they supply to aromatherapists as well as to the public. The uses for these hazardous oils in aromatherapy are insignificant compared to their potential to cause severe harm. There is nothing wrong with some of these oils being sold to people such as candle manufacturers, to other trades where the resulting products are safe, or for their use in oil heaters. However, such customers should in my opinion, have totally separate price lists. (not a difficult thing to do in this age of computer word processing).

Unethical labelling of essential oils:

The mislabelling of essential oils for financial gain is common. Instances that I can immediately think of are:

CHAMOMILE MOROC. Often labelled just as "Chamomile oil". This particular oil was originally only sold to the fragrance trade, and yet despite that, it has not undergone Internationally acceptable safety testing. It has no verifiable medicinal uses, or traditional uses worth talking about. Its chemical profile is substantially different from our well-tested and tried Roman chamomile.

Why did it find its way into aromatherapy then? Because some years ago it was half the price or less of Roman chamomile and big profits could be made by selling it as "chamomile". Then the aromatherapy fantasies machine on this oils uses kicked in, promoting its use.

LAVANDIN sold as LAVENDER. There are plenty in this trade that will argue that there is nothing wrong with that. Some years ago I paid for oil to be analysed from a well-known company that was new to the field at the time. Their oil sold as "lavender" was in fact lavandin. Yet, they had a well-known aromatherapy figure advising them. Oh, perhaps it was a packing error !! The fact is they are two significantly different essential oils. Only a few years ago, lavandin was sold on the commercial market at a far lower price than genuine lavender. That is the ONLY reason that the oil was sold to the public as lavender.

PATCHOULI. Available from the large suppliers in a number of **grades**. Some years ago I paid for analysis of the oil supplied by a small aromatherapy school who "ONLY SELL THE FINEST GRADE OILS FROM FRANCE". What was this fine oil - around 40% gurjun balsam, something that the REAL essential oils trade would consider the LOWEST grade patchouli. This company were promoting their products to nurses for use on ill people. It might be safe, but I don't know, and what about all their other oils. Unfortunately, I could only afford the cost of one oil to be analysed. According to their own literature, all their oils were carefully analysed, I can only presume they meant by the firm that **MADE THEM !!**

ROSEWOOD. The little genuine rosewood oil that is around is probably illegal. This is because the rosewood species that have been used for logging and oil are classified as "endangered species" under International agreements. To get round this, traders are labelling the essential oil from the LEAVES of the trees as "rose-**WOOD** oil". How can an essential oil that traditionally has been extracted from the heartwood of a tree be sold as a **WOOD** oil when in fact it is a **LEAF oil**. In my view that is like saying that petitgrain oil is the same as neroli, "well it all comes from the same tree doesn't it", what do you think?

YARROW. Another essential oil that has not undergone formal safety testing. So, why is it used in aromatherapy? Because it was half the price or less than German chamomile. Because ill informed aromatherapy teachers and chemists presumed that because it contains a lot of azulene's, that its activity will be similar to German chamomile. As it is cheap it is used to 'extend' genuine German chamomile. Therefore if an oil is labelled as "pure German chamomile" but it is 'cut' with yarrow, it is obviously not genuine, may have unknown effects on the skin, and may not work for the conditions you want to use it for.

YLANG NO. 2 or 3 sold as Ylang No. 1. Oh yes very common that one. Few aromatherapists in their training are exposed to the smell of the different grades and qualities of essential oils, so you can't always rely on your nose.

These are just a few examples of misdescription of essential oils which can significantly effect what you intend using them for. This of course does not even begin to attend the problem of synthetic chemicals and solvents added to essential oils.

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