

Aromatherapy: Making Dollars out of Scents

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Aromatherapy (sometimes called aroma therapy) is described by its proponents as "the therapeutic use of the essential oils of plants." These oils are said to be highly concentrated substances extracted from flowers, leaves, stalks, fruits, and roots, and also distilled from resins. They are alleged to contain hormones, vitamins, antibiotics, and antiseptics and to represent the "life force," "spirit," or "soul" of the plant [1]. The oils are administered in small quantities through inhalation, massage, or other applications to the skin. Occasionally, a product is taken internally. The products include diffusers, lamps, pottery, candles, pendants, earrings, shampoos, skin creams, lotions, and bath salts, and shower gels. *Health Foods Business* estimated that the total of aromatherapy products sold through health-food stores was about \$59 million in 1995 and \$105 million in 1996.

Aroma Vera, Inc., of Los Angeles, claims that "essential oils have the power to purify the air we breathe while they relax, stimulate, soothe or sharpen our senses . . . a wonderful antidote to the air pollution and 'scentsory' imbalance of modern life." It also claims that inhaling the scents "balances the biological background," "revitalizes the cells," and produces a "strong energizing effect on the sympathetic nervous system." Other claims in the company's brochures include:

Product Name	Features/Claimed Benefits
Calming	Lends a slight sense of euphoria - perfect for unwinding after a stressful day
Clear Mind	Freshens and sharpens the mind, making it more alert
Drainer/Detoxification	Promotes elimination of toxins, helps tone and firm the body
Meditation	Facilitates deep relaxation
Mental Power	Designed for sustained intellectual power and focus
Purifier	Ideal to rid the atmosphere of smoke and heavy odors
Respiration	Helps open the lungs and clear respiration
Sacred	Helps open higher energy centers
Slimming/Circulation	Promotes circulation and encourages elimination of excess fluids

Joint Adventure, of Rogers, Arkansas, states that essential oils can be used for "many different purposes from athlete's foot to enlightenment and almost every point between!" The products in its 1997 catalog include *Love Potion*, *Germ Immune*, and *Smoker's Remedy*. Its *Tropical Sun* is claimed to "Increase circulation and warm your body . . . helps fight infection while strengthening the immune system."

Another company touts aromatherapy's promise as "a mood alternative, as biofeedback tied in to

relaxation, stress release, concentration and meditation." Yet another describes the oils as "an alternative to synthetic drugs to feel good." A practitioner has claimed that the technique "addresses the nervous system and the energy fields of the body. It soothes the body, cleans the body, clears the body, and tones the body." *The Complete Book of Essential Oils and Aromatherapy*, by Valerie Ann Worwood, states that there are about 300 essential oils and that they constitute an extremely effective medical system. The web site of Beyond Aromatherapy (<http://www.beyondaroma.com>) states (quoting Hippocrates) "There is a remedy for every illness to be found in nature" Its online catalog includes descriptions of "ancient healing uses," astrological correspondence, and Chinese medicine characteristics of more than 80 essential oils.

Aromatherapy for Common Ailments, by Shirley Price, tabulates which oils are to be used for more than forty problems, including depression, sex-drive problems, bronchitis, athlete's foot, high blood pressure, cystitis, head lice. Her table identifies from three to nine oils "likely to help" each problem. She reassures:

With self-help aromatherapy, you will be using oils recommended for a particular ailment or preventative treatment, but it should not take you long to discover which of them work best for you as an individual, particularly since simply liking the aroma of an oil may indicate that it will help you.

The Aromatherapy Workbook charts more than one hundred therapeutic applications. Author Marcel Lavabre maintains:

Even through it can relieve symptoms, aromatherapy primarily aims at curing the causes of disease. The main therapeutic action of essential oils consists in strengthening the organs and their functions, and acting on the defense mechanisms of the body. They do not do the job for the body; they help the body do its own job and thus do not weaken the organism. Their action is enhanced by all natural therapies that aim to restore the vitality of the individual.

The American Alliance of Aromatherapy, a trade association, publishes a quarterly *Journal of Aromatherapy* to keep readers informed of pertinent research, books, and news. The American Aromatherapy Association offers "certification" based on attendance at two 3-day weekends plus submission of a thesis that includes case studies. The course includes such topics as internal methods of treatment, essential oils in healing, addressing common health problems, and how to market yourself. The International Association of Aromatherapists has "accredited" an eleven-month correspondence course with six seminars and two final exams. Completion of the program leads to "certification" as an "Aromatherapist Practitioner." Aromatherapy Seminars, the educational division of Aroma Vera, offers "5-day certification" and other courses and claims to have over 3,500 graduates. The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy sponsors conferences and publishes *Scentsitivity Quarterly*.

The FDA regulates perfumes as cosmetics, which it defines as "articles to be introduced into or otherwise applied to the body to cleanse, beautify, promote attractiveness or alter appearance." A general claim that a perfume's aroma is good or beneficial is a cosmetic claim that does not require FDA approval. In 1986, the agency warned that marketing a scent with a preventive or therapeutic claim would make the product a drug subject to regulatory action. Although several manufacturers have done so, the FDA has not made them stop.

A private action may have some impact. In 1997, San Diego attorney Morsé Mehrban filed a civil lawsuit charging that Aroma Vera has violated the California Business and Professions Code by advertising more than 70 false claims about various products. Mehrban disputes that the products can promote health and well-being, relax the body, relax the mind, enhance mood, purify the air, are antidotes to air pollution, relieve fatigue, tone the body, nourish the skin, promote circulation, alleviate feminine cramps, or do various other things claimed by the company. The suit seeks restitution for consumers, cessation of these claims, and payment of reasonable attorney fees and costs. The National Council Against Health Fraud is acting as plaintiff in the case. In 1998, the trial judge ruled that the council had no standing to file the suit and could not possibly show that there is a likelihood that the public would be misled by the advertising in question, because it did not produce any misled victims. However, in 1999, an appeals court reversed this ruling so that the case could go forward. This court concluded that "in order to prove a cause of action for misleading advertising, a plaintiff need only show the public is likely to be misled." [2]

Aromatherapy has most of the attributes needed to thrive in the quack marketplace. As far as I know, however, its advocates are not pressing for inclusion under national health insurance.

References

1. Berwick A. Holistic Aromatherapy: Balance the Body and Soul with Essential Oils. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1994.
2. Court of Appeal of the State of California, Second Appellate District, Division Five. National Council Against Health Fraud, Inc., v. Aroma Vera, Inc., et al. Superior Court No. BC183903. August 10, 1999.

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