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Preface

This document is a guideline for the safe use of essential oils for aromatherapists using this skilled intervention in South Africa. The guideline was compiled using various international and local guidelines, journal articles and books, as referred to in the reference list.

The Aromatherapy Association of South Africa (AromaSA) represents professional, therapeutic aromatherapy practitioners in South Africa. Such practitioners have undergone intensive training on the safe use of essential oils, based on the chemical composition of each oil, as well as botany, anatomy, physiology and pathophysiology.

In South Africa, therapeutic aromatherapy practitioners are required by law, to register with the Allied Health Professions Council of South Africa (AHPCSA) in order to receive a legal licence to practice. Practitioners are required to adhere to the scope of practice as set down by the AHPCSA. The main function of the AHPCSA is to protect the public, relative to the actions of registered practitioners. Furthermore, all registered practitioners are required to comply with continuing professional development (CPD) requirements as set out by the AHPCSA, in order to update professional knowledge and maintain their licence to practice.

Introduction

Aromatherapy is an ancient, natural and holistic therapy that uses essential oils to treat the entire body (mind, body and spirit). These oils assist the various body systems to function at optimal levels. It includes the art and science of blending specially selected essential oils, which have been extracted from various parts of aromatic plants and trees, to bring about positive change in the body and mind. Essential oils have psychological (affecting emotion),

pharmacological (affecting chemistry) and physiological (affecting bodily function and process) benefits. ¹

The term 'aromatherapy' was coined in the early 1900s by French chemist, René-Maurice Gattefossé, however, the practice of aromatherapy has its roots in the most ancient healing practices of mankind. Ancient civilizations understood the value of aromatic plants and the discovery of the healing properties of these oils was undoubtedly made before recorded history. Different civilizations have their own specific uses of the healing benefits of these plants, and it cannot be determined which of these groups of people first realised the benefits of the plants. However, the sharing of this information became possible with industrialisation, the development of the printing press and the opening up of the trade routes. Essential oils have been used in religious ceremonies, perfumery, healing and hygiene since time immemorial. ²

Aromatherapy has become very popular throughout the world in the 21st century. Essential oils are readily available to the general public and can be incorporated in everyday life including health care, cosmetics, perfumery, personal and home cleaning agents. There is also a large range of aromatherapy self-help books available. However, there is a downside to the availability of the essential oils and the information as it can be misunderstood, abused or incorrectly used. This has led to an undermining of the role of the professional therapeutic aromatherapist. ¹

For the profession of therapeutic aromatherapy to survive, it is imperative that standards are set and maintained regarding the quality and appropriate usage of essential oils and the development of education standards for the training of therapeutic aromatherapists.

How do essential oils work?

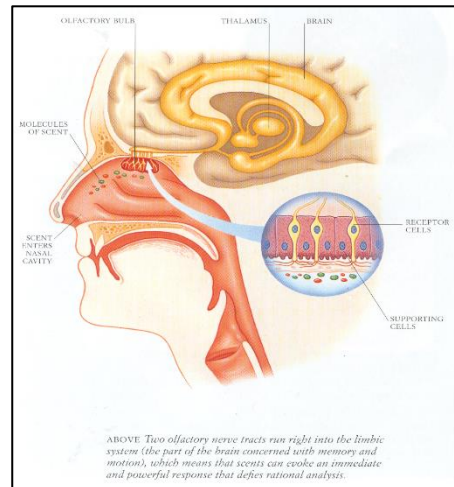
Modern research has largely confirmed the traditionally held beliefs regarding the therapeutic uses of particular plants and their essential oils. Essential oils are concentrated and need to be diluted in a vegetable base oil such as grapeseed, sweet almond, coconut or jojoba oils, amongst others. Essential oils tend to have a synergistic effect, resulting in a blend of oils having a greater overall effect than that of their individual components. ³

Each essential oil used in aromatherapy has different properties. While some oils have a calming, relaxing effect, others have energizing properties. In practice, 3 or 4 essential oils are usually mixed to create a blend to meet the individual and specific needs of each patient. As the oils are very powerful, a low dilution of the essential oils is generally all that is necessary to achieve the desired therapeutic outcome.

Dilution of essential oil relies on a number of clinical factors such as the age of the patient, integrity of the skin, condition being treated, and overall physical and mental health. Although dilutions for professional use can vary from 0.2% to 20%, a general rule of thumb when blending essential oils for use in massage treatment is a 2.5% -3% dilution for a healthy adult. Dilution rates for topical application for babies and children varies considerably: 0-3 months [if using essential oils at all] is 0.1 to 0.2%; 3 to 24 months – 0.25 to 0.5%; 2 to 6 years – 1 to 2%; 6 to 15 years 1.5 to 3%; and 15 years and older - 2.5 to 5%.

Dilution for frail, elderly, convalescing and pregnant women is generally restricted to 1%. A 5% dilution can be used when blending oils for a bath treatment. ⁴

When an essential oil is inhaled, the molecules are transmitted via the olfactory receptor neurons to the olfactory bulbs that are located at the back of the nose and then directly to the limbic system. The limbic system is the area of the brain responsible for memory, thoughts, feelings and emotions. The limbic system also plays a role in controlling several unconscious physiological functions, such as breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure. It is also the part of the brain responsible for survival, feeding, reproduction and caring for our young, and fight or flight responses. Inhaling an essential oil has an immediate effect on mood, feelings and emotions.



Simultaneously, molecules are also transmitted to the lungs via the respiratory system. From here they are absorbed into the bloodstream and carried to various parts of the body where the molecules can interact with cells to bring about various therapeutic effects. ⁵

When used topically, the essential oils are absorbed via the epidermis, move through the soft tissue (dermis) to the bloodstream via the capillaries, which transport the molecules to the cells and their related treatment areas. They then travel to the liver where they bind with liver enzymes i.e., are metabolized and transformed into water soluble metabolites, ready for elimination/excretion via the kidneys, the bowel, the lungs and the skin. ⁵

The physical benefits of massage include, amongst others, relieving stress and anxiety, stimulating the circulation of blood and lymph, regulating blood pressure, reducing muscular tension, reducing inflammation and relieving pain. Aromatherapy massage can also help to reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, trauma, improve sleep and help with headaches. The use of essential oils can be used to assist in disorders of dermatology, oncology, gastro intestinal route, mental health, palliative care, pain management, women's health, pregnancy and birth, respiratory care, infections and wounds, care of the elderly and paediatrics to name but a few. ¹¹⁵

The pharmacological properties and effects of essential oils are varied and include, amongst others: analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial (antibacterial, antifungal, antiviral, antiparasitic), antipyretic, antiseptic, antispasmodic, sedative, stimulant, tonic to various systems, antispasmodic, bronchodilatory, cholagogic, cytophylactic, expectorant, febrifugal, hepatic and sudorific. ¹

Safety

Essential oils are very powerful and as they have physiological, psychological and pharmacological effects on the body, safety is of utmost importance. Some safety guidelines for the use of essential oils include;

- **DO NOT TAKE ESSENTIAL OILS ORALLY.** Ingestion of essential oils is strictly prohibited by the AHPCSA (refer to AHPCSA Board Notice 104 of 2019).
- Do not use undiluted essential oils topically unless qualified to do so.
- Certain oils such as camphor, cinnamon bark, mugwort, pennyroyal, tansy, thuja and wormwood, amongst others, are classified as hazardous oils and should only be used by qualified and knowledgeable aromatherapists.
- Do not use essential oils on damaged, hypersensitive or diseased skin.
- Certain essential oils are contraindicated for people with epilepsy, for use during pregnancy as well as for high or low blood pressure
- Some essential oils, particularly citrus oils are phototoxic, meaning exposure to sun after applying the oils may result in severe sunburn. ⁴

To expand on the dangers of internal ingestion of essential oils, a general principle of physics demonstrates that oil and water do not mix. Therefore, advocating the ingestion of a few drops of essential oils mixed with water carries many clinical risks, since the essential oil molecules, which are fat-loving (lipophilic) will attach to the delicate mucous membrane lining of the digestive tract, causing disruption to these cells. Dependent upon the essential oil, the possibility exists that this can cause erosion of this membrane resulting in ulceration. Many essential oils, if taken orally, are known to interact with prescription drugs, such as diabetes medication and drugs metabolized in the liver by cytochrome P450 2B6 (CYP2B6).

Likewise, undiluted/neat topical application of essential oils directly onto the skin can be hazardous. The recommended, and safe, method of topical application is to blend the essential oil/s into a carrier, such as a vegetable oil, gel or cream. Again, dependent upon the essential oil, neat topical application can result in sensitization, allergic reaction or cause inflammation, pigmentation, and blistering on the skin.

Illegal practice

It must be pointed out that registered practitioners are prohibited, by law, to distribute products, including essential oils, on a multi-level marketing basis (refer to AHPCSA Board Notice 1 of 2018).

Furthermore, in South Africa the law states that only persons who hold a licence to practice medicine may diagnose, prescribe and dispense. Therefore, anyone advocating the ingestion of essential oils is committing a legal offence, and in so doing puts themselves at risk of prosecution from the relevant health authorities, or civil action from complainants affected by such recommendations.

Members of the public are advised to contact either the Aromatherapy Association of South Africa (AromaSA), for professional advice and qualified practitioner referrals, or the Allied

Health Professions Council of South Africa (AHPCSA) for contact details of qualified registered Therapeutic Aromatherapists.

Contact details are:

info@AromaSa.org.za / www.AromaSA.org.za

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