

## LECTURE TO THE AROMATHERAPY TRADE COUNCIL

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**Anthony C. Dweck**  
Consultant, Dweck Data  
8 Merrifield Road, Ford, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP4 6DF

### **"Essential oils for care of the skin – myth or reality? "**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this celebration of essential oils.

My talk today will concentrate entirely on natural products, with an emphasis on the role of natural odorous plants in herbal medicine. I had thought about calling it "Stink, Scent, Sex, Science and Skin", and though I decided to change the title, the content is more or less on this topic.

#### **The use of the essential oils and fragrant materials**

Let us now look at the historical background to the development of medicinal plants not only in our own culture, but also throughout the world, and let us pay particular attention to those materials which are fragrant either as essential oils or as herb materials.

There are many odours which are truly unpleasant, but is this perceived unpleasantness a result of our upbringing, or is it a **genuine** dislike of the odour? Most perfumes have as their base note a real stench which is responsible for the longevity of the fragrance on the skin. Aldehyde C11 smells of vomit, other notes such as civetine and synthetic musk have a faecal odour.

If we were honest, we would admit that the human senses are fascinated by these fragrance notes, but I suspect that the association of the odour with something that is dirty or unclean stems from our earliest recollections and the subsequent inhibitions produced by parental influence.

If one goes back in history to virtually any culture, then one will find various animal and bird droppings used quite extensively in medicinal preparations. Was this because "if it doesn't taste nice or smell nice, then it is bound to be doing you some good" or was it the case that the introduction of this type of material into the product had some real medicinal effect - say through the presence of enzymes or other active materials, which we do not know about? We will probably never have the answer.

Imagine that we could go back through time and space to visit past civilisations and revisit the very history on which our industry is founded. Better still lets do exactly that. Join me in that trip through time and space and let us drop in and take a snapshot of the herbal world about us - and as our time is so very short we can only take away a small sample of that

experience with us, so let us capture the very essence of every visit with those things that amuse or amaze us.

1300 B.C.

## **The Egyptians**

[SLIDE G19] We leave on our journey back through time and return to the very beginnings of earliest medicinal history. A check on our chronometer shows us to be in the year 1,300 B.C.

[SLIDE Q36] Sadly, the earliest fragments of papyrus discovered so far, relating to Pharaonic herbalism, is probably as late as the second century AD. The Ebers papyrus is the most famous of the medicinal texts, and unfortunately the only published translation by Ebbell in 1937 is sadly lacking in many departments.

[SLIDE Q39] Much of the Egyptian culture centred on the use of essential oils, indeed the Egyptians were huge importers of rare and precious oils from all around the Mediterranean basin, the Far East and from neighbouring countries.

Throughout the Bible one finds numerous references to the custom of anointing various parts of the body with oils. There are also many illustrations in papyri, on artifacts and in tomb wall paintings of these undoubtedly expensive and precious oils being both prepared and applied.

[SLIDE G21 & G22] Here is a slide of Tutankhamen's throne, if we look more closely, then we can see the young Queen Ankhesenamen applying oils to his collar.

[SLIDE G23 & G24] In this next slide we see a panel from the gold shrine that surrounded his sarcophagus, again looking more closely one can see that his young queen is again caught in the act of applying oils to the young pharaoh.

[SLIDE Q35] In many illustrations and carvings you will notice the appearance of strange cones on the heads of the people portrayed. These were highly perfumed unguents of low melting point and as the wearer became warm, so the cone would slowly melt and the fragranced oils would run over them.

[SLIDE ] The art of distillation was not known to the early Egyptians and so the process of making these cones was extremely complex in order to preserve the more delicate fragrance notes.

[SLIDE Q41] Recipes were so important that they were inscribed in stone on the walls of the temples. One such recipe, or more accurately process, was found on the tomb of a Theban tomb of an unknown unguent maker, who predated Tutankhamen by some 100 years. It was for the manufacture of the very same perfumed cones that I have just mentioned, and, I must say, it demonstrates a large number of perfumery and herbal preparation techniques

[SLIDE Q39] First a man would make wood chips from a fragrant piece of wood. These perfumed chips were then macerated in wine, and after a few days the liqueur would be strained off. They had effectively made a hydroalcoholic infusion.

[SLIDE D37 & D36] A slide taken at William Ransoms shows a similar process. Here we have the barrel into which the material to be macerated is to be placed, and here we have a view looking into the vessel on the divided herb, once the infusion has been run off.

To this they would add fat and other fragrant herbs and then form a decoction of the mixture by slow heating. These fragrant herbs obviously yielded their virtues more easily to the oily fat than to the hydroalcoholic wine.

[SLIDE D33] My next slide again taken at Ransoms shows these shallow heating pans, which would not have looked out of place in the unguent makers facility.

[SLIDE] The mixture was then allowed to cool, so that the fat set and could be skimmed off.

Herbs and spices were then ground and mixed with this fat, which was fashioned into cakes and allowed to stand. Now I can only assume that the herbs they used had volatile oils and esters which would have been too sensitive to use a heating process without degrading.

This last step, of allowing plant material to infuse fragrance into fatty materials is known as the technique of enflourage and the final product would today be called a pommade.

Finally, the wax was refined by pouring boiling water over the cakes and the fragrant wax skimmed off (leaving all the spice and herb detritus behind), and fashioned into cones ready for use.

I find it quite amazing that they were both familiar with, and proficient in, the techniques of infusion, decoction and enflourage.

[SLIDE] But to find out just how messy this method of perfumery was, we need to look at Psalms Chapter 133 verse 2, where we read "it is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to skirts of his garments.

But did the ancient Pharaohs have an understanding of aromatherapy, or were they using the fragrances purely for the pleasure of their odour? I would like to think that they fully understood the psychological implications of the fragrances that they were using.

[SLIDE] In Psalms Chapter 45 verse 8 we can perhaps find another clue: All thy garments smell of myrrh and aloes, and cassia out of the ivory palaces, whereby they have made thee glad.

We certainly know that the ancient Egyptians used opium poppy seeds (*Papaver somniferum*) for culinary use, but that they were totally unaware of the narcotic properties of its exudate. There is no evidence that they smoked hemp either - so they were not makers of spliffs or drug abusers as far as we can tell from forensic studies!

However, they did have a number of hypnotic incenses, which have been described in the detailed writings of Plutarch and Herodotus, and these were much used in religious ceremonies to create a 'dreamy state of happiness', without being narcotic.

The most legendary of these was 'kyphi', which can be traced at least as far back as the 16th century BC. It was used in fumigation as well as being taken internally, and it served the multiple purpose of aiding communication with the gods, uplifting the spirit, and curing ailments. This incense was also highly regarded as a medicine for treating lung disease, asthma and liver disorders.

The recipe for this preparation is as follows, and I must thank Lise Manniche author of An [Slide L48] Ancient Egyptian Herbal for her help:-

-oOo-

1. Take 270g of *Acorus calamus* (Sweet Flag); *Andropogon schoenanthus* (aromatic rush); Pistachio resin; cassia; cinnamon(?); mint(?); Aspalathos (?). Grind and sieve. Only the powder is to be used, take 2/5ths of the total.
2. Take 270g each of juniper berries; an unidentified plant; pkr plant; Cyperus longus; total 1080g. Grind. Add to this 2250g wine. Leave until the next morning. Half the wine will be absorbed by the herbs. The rest to be discarded.
3. Take 1800g raisins and 2250g oasis wine. Grind together well. Remove the rind and pips of the raisins (weighing 1350g). place the rest (weighing 2700g) in a pot with the herbs and leave for five days.
4. Mix 1200g frankincense and 3000g honey in a vessel. Boil gently until thickened and reduced by 1/5th, the total weight being 3360g. Mix the other ingredients and leave for 5 days
5. Add to this 1143g finely ground myrrh and you will have 10,164g kyphi.

-oOo-

Plutarch says of Kyphi:-

"Without drunkenness it relaxes and loosens the chain-like sorrows and tensions of daily cares. It polishes and purifies like a mirror the faculty which is imagination and receptive to dreams, like the notes of the lyre which the Pythagoreans used before sleep, to charm and heal the emotive and irrational or the soul. For odors often recall the power of perception when it is failing, while often they obscure and calm it since the exhalations penetrate the body by reason of their smooth softness."

What a wonderful poetic description! Don't you wish that he could have written some of your pack copy?

But we have stayed too long in the land of the fragrant Nile and the Great Pyramids and we must move on, if we are to see more.

800 B.C.

## **The Indians**

[SLIDE G41] We move north, but not much forward in time to 800 B.C., to another fabulous period of antiquity. To a land of fragrant oils and ancient medicine to gods with names like Ganesh, Krishna and Shiva (Shiva the god to whom Yoga and the destruction of disease are ascribed). A land of patchouli, cedarwood, cinnamon and precious spices, of exotic flowers like gardenia and hibiscus and oils of exotic roses, galingale, vetiver and lemon grass, but most of all the luxurious and sensuous jasmin.

[SLIDE B25] But back to jasmine, this is the variety that we all know, and I feel sure that many of you will have this variety growing in your gardens, but the perfumery industry use a variety with a much larger flower.

The oil from these flowers would have also been very well known to the Egyptians, but exceedingly rare apart from in the most privileged of society. The similarity between the Egyptian and Indian medicine in the pre-Christian era in itself is quite staggering.

The name Jasmine or Jessamine is derived from the Persian Yasmin from the Arabic "jas" meaning despair and "min" meaning a lie.

I will spare you the medicinal uses of jasmine, because the most interesting use of Jasmin oil was as an aphrodisiac and perhaps this gives us a clue as to why the Hindus called this plant by the romantic name "Moonlight of the Grove".

Now there are many reasons why a plant may heighten sexual stamina or libido, but jasmin is special. It does not work by irritating the genital tract, stimulating blood flow or by acting as a tonic, nor does it act as a proflactic or placebo. What it does do, is act to heighten the alpha wave activity in the brain - and when alpha wave activity is increased, then so are the levels of awareness and perception.

One might conclude that the action of this oil is not to physically improve sex, but more to improve the mental stimuli that are required to get things going and, more to the point, keep them going!

### 1st Century

#### **Rome: Pliny the Elder**

We fly forward in time to the first century and to one of the earliest recorders of herbal medicine. We are in Como in northern Italy just in time to witness the birth of Caius Plinius Secundus or Pliny the Elder.

The year is A.D.23, and in A.D.79 he is destined to die during the eruption of Vesuvius, an event graphically described by his nephew and heir Pliny the Younger. I am sure that any Classics scholars amongst you will have studied Pliny as part of your course - I certainly did.

[SLIDE G33] Pliny the Elder was a huge collector of data and information, he wrote many books, but only one survives, a work of a mere 37 volumes, which was probably the first

encyclopaedia ever written. The first volume was purely devoted to the contents of all the other volumes! It was called the *Historia Naturalis* and this slide shows a page from the edition held in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It was probably made in the 15th century commissioned and owned by Gregorio Lolli Piccolomini, a physician.

[SLIDE G34] We suspect this, because his coat of arms appear in one of the plates of the book, which depicts a physician bleeding his patient. A technique which, incidentally, is seriously being examined by modern medicine along with the use of medicinal leeches (*Hirudo medicinalis*) to help clear blood clots from forming under skin grafts. If anyone is interested in reading more on the subject, then I would commend to you a recent article in last December's *The Pharmaceutical Journal*.

Many of the volumes are devoted to plants and drugs, which he grouped according to not only trees and plants but also to gems and stones, but as we are only taking snapshots at each location I will take some simple examples.

A passage that I particularly liked was the reference to the fact that (and I quote) "a poultice is more efficacious if laid upon him by a maiden, herself fasting and naked, who at the same time has to repeat certain special words". I have no doubt that any man would feel immensely better under these conditions but I have been unable to ascertain what those words should be, I am not sure that it really matters!

One of the first mentions of aromatic oils is the blending of lion fat with rose oil to preserve the complexion. Now nobody would want to endanger our wildlife, but the use of rose oil for skin benefit is widespread throughout the Middle East, India and the Orient. Rosewater and glycerine toner is making a popular comeback today.

Pliny also makes quite a profound statement for its time "The properties of all plants are weakened by habit, and they cease to be beneficial when needed if they have been in daily use". This applies as much today as it did then, and we could happily include modern synthetic medicines in this statement.

### 12th century

#### **Germany: Abbess Hildegard von Bingen**

[SLIDE Q43] And so it is time to set off again and we fly north and forward in time. We arrive in the 12th century in the small German town of Bingen, here we find a remarkable lady, who was a mystic, stateswoman, writer of holy songs and also a phenomenal herbalist. Her name is the Abbess Hildegard von Bingen.

[SLIDE H20] Many of her recipes include fragrant herbal materials, in one example she mentions the use of wood betony leaves (*Stachys officinalis*) used in herb pillows. Our own remedy used in much the same way would be hops (*Humulus lupulus*). She says:-

"Whoever is plagued by wrong dreams should have betony leaves close by when going to sleep, and this person will see and feel fewer bad dreams".

[SLIDE D30] She also uses another fragrant material, powdered English Geranium in a 'flu powder, which should be smelt, (she stresses) **not sniffed**, several times a day after blowing the nose. It has quite a sharp smell and is certainly less aggressive than Eucalyptus and Wintergreen oils or menthol and camphor.

[SLIDE I14] There is an interesting cure for hayfever, which is to inhale the fumes from smoking Yew-tree wood, prepared by placing the shavings of a small piece of the wood into a flower pot and then heating the pot on the stove. A flowerpot seems a strange idea, because it has a hole in the bottom, until you think about the purpose of the apparatus. The air circulates through the bottom of the pot and convects upwards carrying more vapour than a pot without the hole.

it really did seem to relieve nasal congestion and was quite soothing to the eyes.

### 15th century

#### **Gilbertus Anglicus**

We now venture timidly into the 15th century and make our way to London, where we discover a pot of Gilbert's ointment. Suffering from sore lips, we apply some of the soothing salve and read the recipe on the label. I am assuming that he was very far-sighted and had anticipated the 6th. amendment.

[SLIDE G12] Take a very fat puppy dog and skin him; then take the juice of cucumber, rue and pellitory; berries of ivy and juniper; fat of vulture, fox and bear in equal parts; stuff the puppy therewith and boil him. Add wax to the grease that floats on the surface and make therefrom an ointment. This product has not been tested on animals. Signed Gilbertus Anglicus.

### 17th century

#### **John Gerard**

#### VALERIAN

But, if all this talk of awful recipes is too much to bear, then let us quickly move on to something more soothing - to Valerian, but not the Indian Valerian (*Valeriana wallichii*) found in the Himalayas, but the Common Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*) that is found throughout Europe, America and the Far East.

[SLIDE F47] Galen and Dioscorides called valerian 'phu' - a descriptive response to its odour (which has been likened to the smell of well-seasoned dirty socks! Yet in the 16th century the smell was well liked, and this shows just how perceptions, preferences and vogues can all change with time.

[SLIDE F49] This slide shows *Cetranthus ruber* or Red Valerian, which has similar properties. We look in on John Gerard, an Elizabethan physician, it is now the year 1597 and his great "herbal or the historie of plants" has just been published. He refers to the plant not only as Valerian, but also as Setwall, interestingly the old name phu is still popular in the

shops. Surprisingly he is using the dry root as a counter-poison and for the healing of slight cuts, wounds and small hurts.

He writes: "They that will have their heale, must put Setwall in their keale". Keale, I can only assume is a kind of potage or stew. I don't know whether a keal is some type of potage or stew, or simply a saucepan.

The use of valerian as a sedative or tranquilliser was not really appreciated in this country until about the 17th century.

Up until quite recently it was thought that the action of the active chemicals was utilised by ingestion, but that view has changed and one piece of research from Yokohama has shown that odorant inhalation alone can increase sleeping time.

In another study, it sedated agitated patients, but stimulated those suffering from fatigue. Valerian improved the quality of sleep in subjects in another study, as observed in their brain-wave patterns. It also reduced the time it took for them to fall asleep, and was especially effective for the elderly and the habitually poor sleepers. But it did not affect their dream recall or ability to wake up in the morning.

In Germany, hyperactive children have been treated with valerian since the 1970's. After taking valerian for only a few weeks, 120 children diagnosed as hyperactive, anxious or learning disabled had better muscle coordination and reaction time, and showed less aggression, restlessness, anxiety and fear.

People sheltering for their lives during the blitz of World War Two, had to endure the constant bombardment and infernal battering of the Luftwaffe. There were no modern tranquilliser available and so they were prescribed valerian to calm them through the horrific air raids.

And now for an interesting thought. Excessive dependance on valerian causes headaches, mental agitation, much restlessness and severe cases of delusion. It is said that Adolf Hitler was a valerian addict and regularly took large and excessive doses. Those adverse effects described, fit quite well with the descriptions made of his personality in the closing stages of the war. It makes you wonder doesn't it.

#### GERMAN CHAMOMILE (*Matricaria recutita*)

[SLIDE AD 1] While we are talking about the war, a favourite herb of mine is German Chamomile. Now this is a plant that is useful in all its forms. The aqueous extract is rich in a flavonoid called apigenin and also contains its associated glycoside apigenin-7 glycoside. These flavonoids give the extract anti-inflammatory, soothing and indeed healing properties.

However, chamomile has another trick up its sleeve, because the essential oil, whether steam distilled or extracted using Critical CO<sub>2</sub> has identical properties, which are due to the matricin, bisabolol and azulene present in the oil. It is the azulene which gives the oil its wonderful blue colour.

#### TEA TREE OIL (*Melaleuca alternifolia*)



[SLIDE AM 39, AM40, AM 41, AM 44, A,45, ETC] This traditional aboriginal favourite from Australia is probably one of the hottest essential oils on the market.

It is antibacterial, antiseptic, cleansing and has even been cited for use on nits, though the evidence is slim. It has been used as a disinfectant. Other uses include cleansing of the skin, particularly in acneic skin conditions or where the skin has boils, spots and other problem conditions that are hard to clear..

You may be wondering how this tree got its name, well I have to say that British sailors were never very bright at the best of times and thought this would make a refreshing brew!

## CONCLUSION

But our power is waning and we can travel no further, the excitement of plant discovery begins to tarnish as modern drugs start to replace the old traditional remedies. Aspirin replaces willow, synthetic corticosteroids replace hundreds of plants with anti-inflammatory properties, benzocaine replaces traditional local anaesthetics, and so the list continues.