

## **The ‘Therapeutic Grade’ Essential Oils Disinformation Campaign.**

(Adapted from part of Kirkham K. & Burfield T. (2006) “Naked aromatherapy – the truth laid bare” *Aromatherapy Today* **36**, 28-33, as further updated in *Cropwatch Newsletter* August 2007).

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### **Pre-amble..**

Many professional aromatherapists have become unwitting victims of a marketing ploy by essential oil suppliers, whereby ‘approved therapeutic grades’ of essential oils are advertised for sale. **Let us be quite clear about this - there is no such thing as a ‘therapeutic grade essential oil’, and no quality standards for the authentication or performance of essential oils specifically exist within aromatherapy per se. This latter situation results from the failure of professional aromatherapy organisations and aromatherapy essential oil trading associations to issue a comprehensive set of aromatherapy oil standards**, in spite of individual schemes being put forward (e.g. the initiative of Jones, 1998).

Cropwatch reviewed the disinformation on ‘therapeutic grade essential oils’ in 2006 and 2007 (see references), based on the marketing hype put out by the *Young Living Essential Oils* (YLEO) pyramidal sales organisation. To do this we checked out the claims made by YLEO with the certifying bodies AFNOR & ISO themselves which confirmed our initial view that their (YLEO) statements were inaccurate / misleading. It is not without some irony that the March 2006 edition of *Aromatherapy Today* carrying the very article disproving the existence of therapeutic grade oils, also carried a full back-cover advertisement for – you guessed it – therapeutic grade oils, courtesy of an Australian supplier (Essential Therapeutics).

Since 2006/7 the situation has worsened, such that staff at the National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy (NAHA) have forwarded details of further organisations marketing mythical “therapeutic grade essential oils to Cropwatch. The advertising content seems not dissimilar to that originally put out by YLEO. We examine the progression of this trend below.

The situation has been further investigated by Elston (2009) on *Aromaconnection* who investigates *DōTerra’s* registered trade mark for the mythical ‘therapeutic grade essential oils’ – this can be followed at [www.aromaconnection.org](http://www.aromaconnection.org) Coincidentally Cropwatch has also been looking at *DōTerra’s* website claims (see below).

### **Existing Essential Oils Standards.**

Over the decades, there have been a number of bodies that have laid down working standards for essential oils, often geared towards the needs of the pharmaceutical, food or fragrance industry sectors, but often these standards do not prove entirely suitable for essential oil quality monitoring in the aromatherapy profession, since (for example) they do not consider appropriate chemotypes

employed in aromatherapy best practice, or sometimes, they ignore preferred geographic origins of the essential oils commonly employed.

Essential oil standards for the pharmaceutical trade are drawn up, maintained and published in the form of National Pharmacopoeias. These Pharmacopoeia's are exorbitantly expensive and subject to severe photocopying restrictions in many libraries (you may consult them, and take notes from them in most libraries however). The British Pharmacopoeia (BP) for example, is produced by the British Pharmacopoeia Commission Secretariat, part of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency. Many of the monographs for essential oils contain fairly exacting monographs including physical and chemical standards, thin layer chromatography and GC assay requirements. There are also pharmacopoeias for individual nations, such as the United States Pharmacopoeia, and of Germany, China, India, etc. It is important also to mention the widely consulted European Pharmacopoeia, now currently in its sixth edition.

Also in the US, a collection of monographs on individual essential oils (**EOA Standards**) were produced a number of decades previously by the Scientific Committee of the Essential Oil Association Inc. for use by the essential oil trade. The specifications for these older standards were geared in some cases especially towards US home-produced oils (e.g. those for peppermint oil) which has attracted some subsequent criticism from producers in other countries (India, Russia etc.) trying to produce commodities conforming to these specifications. In France, the Association Française de Normalisation (**AFNOR**) produces the standards for the oil trade. Australian Standards for essential oils (e.g. AS2785-1985 for tea tree oil) also exist, but since for example over 90% of Australian tea tree oil is exported, compliance to international essential oil standards is more relevant.

The Food Chemicals Codex V was produced at the request of the FDA and is widely used for guidance by the food flavourings industry. Many larger established flavour & fragrance houses have their own internal purchasing standards for essential oils, but perhaps the main independent certifying body is now the International Standards Organisation (**ISO Standards TC 54**) which publishes universally accepted standards for individual essential oils. Again the cost of purchasing these individual standards may be insignificant for major essential oil producers, but is inhibitory for many small concerns.

It is not unusual in certain sectors of the food and flavourings sectors to modify or adulterate particular oils in order to meet the requirements of their corporate clients, but essential oils for use in aromatherapy should be produced by purely physical means and be 100% pure and wholly derived from the named botanical source.

So - one of the biggest so-far-unresolved dilemmas aromatherapists face, is how to tell whether a given essential oil fulfils the requirements of quality and purity. Many feel that they have to rely on the supplying company for information or

'word of mouth' testimonials. Inevitably certain companies play on the gullibility of their customers to make unsubstantiated claims.

### **Enter Young Living Essential Oils.**

*Young Living Essential Oils* (YLEO) who promote themselves as a Christian-faith-based (pyramidal) sales organisation, headed up by the controversial figure of Gary Young, have been historically prominent in using the term 'therapeutic quality' in relation to the hyped marketing of essential oils. On [www.therapeutic-grade.com](http://www.therapeutic-grade.com) we found the following YLEO definition of "therapeutic grade" essential oils (downloaded March 2006):

"In Europe, AFNOR (French Association of Normalization) and ISO (International Standards Organization), which has set standards for therapeutic-grade essential oils adopted from AFNOR) provide a set of standards that has been established, outlining the chemical profile and principal constituents that quality essential oils should have. These are widely regarded as the gold standard for testing essential oils. The AFNOR standard is most stringent, and differentiates true therapeutic-grade essential oils from similar Grade A essential oils with inferior chemistry. AFNOR standards state the percentages of certain chemical constituents that must be present for an essential oil to qualify as truly therapeutic-grade. As a general rule, if two or more marker compounds in an essential oil fall outside their proper percentages, the oil may not meet the AFNOR standards. These guidelines help buyers differentiate between a therapeutic-grade essential oil and lower grade oil with a similar chemical makeup and fragrance."

The website described above has now changed its previous factually indefensible content, and is now (Dec 2009) trying to persuade gullible essential oil buyers that 'proper' cultivation, harvesting and distillation are necessary to produce these rare mythical 'therapeutic grade essential oils' of theirs. The example of lavender oil production is given – but much of the content now simply relates to universally observed good manufacturing practice, sprinkled with a few trademark prejudicial and controversial scientific claims.

### **Cropwatch Investigates.**

A spokesperson for AFNOR confirmed to Cropwatch (March 2006) that they **(AFNOR) do not have a standard for therapeutic grade essential oils (and neither do ISO)** and so they do not differentiate between any 'Grade A' and 'therapeutic grade essential oils', as per YLEO claim. This situation wrt AFNOR policy has not changed since 2006, at the present date of writing (Dec 2009). Further, essential oils have never been classified in grades described as A, B, C as suggested by YLEO, and would surely not find any customers for grades less than A grade, even if they did exist! In reality, essential oils used by aromatherapists include minor essential oils, oils of differing geographic origins and specific chemotypes not covered by AFNOR or ISO standards. At the time of our investigation we were further informed that AFNOR would be writing to YLEO asking them to retract misleading statements wrt 'therapeutic grade oils', but the subsequent problem has been that a large number of other aromatherapy essential oil traders are also using these misleading descriptors

As a further point of information, specifications limiting the presence of pesticides, heavy metals, dioxins, PCB's, MCP's, radionuclides and other

hazardous materials are not normally included in recognised essential oil standards (although concentration restrictions for these items may figure in standards of intended use e.g. food flavourings).

Since the publication of Cropwatch's original article (2006), it has come to our attention that although the paragraph quoted above was still there in April 2007 and still appeared on many YLEO - related websites (e.g.. at <http://raindropkit.com/therapeutic.htm>) it no longer appears at [www.therapeutic-grade.com](http://www.therapeutic-grade.com) a website run by Tom Anson of Anson Aromatic Essentials an Independent Distributor of YLEO. Instead we find a page entitled "Setting the Record Straight Concerning AFNOR Correcting the misinformation perpetuated by some aromatherapy companies" <http://www.therapeutic-grade.com/refs/afnor.html>

Anson subsequently issued the following statement on this site in 2007:

"Here is where the record must be set straight. For years, I was taught that the answer to "How do you know ... ?" was **AFNOR**. When I was first getting started with aromatherapy, my mentors told me that **AFNOR** certification is the most reliable indicator of an essential oil's quality is. The only problem is: there is *no such thing* as **AFNOR** certification; **AFNOR** has no such program for certifying essential oils, based on its standards. Its standards cover all specifications for essential oils, but *do not* include any reference to therapeutic grade.

**AFNOR** (the **Association French Normalization Organization Regulation**) acts as a standards-setting body for a variety of products and services - not just essential oils. Contrary to what I had been led to believe, it is *not* a government agency - something like the USDA; it is a private company, and the name **AFNOR** is a registered trademark, and as such, protected property. And, while Young Living seeks to maintain a good working relationship with **AFNOR**, the two are completely separate business entities with no direct ties between them."

Unfortunately Anson did not seem able to let go completely of the concept of "therapeutic - grade" and still used the YLEO wording "What is it that can make one oil a therapeutic-grade essential oil while another is Grade-A, but not therapeutic-grade?" **Knock - Knock! – There is no such thing as a Grade A oil!** No official body gives out certificates for Grade A oils – mainly for the reason that all oils should be Grade A – why would anyone buy a Grade B or a C essential oil!

An interesting development which Cropwatch attempted to pursue was that it was reported in 2006 that YLEO's Director of Research and Development and Quality, a certain William F. Popin, managed to insert himself as chair of the USP Botanical Advisory Board. Cropwatch believed that this represented an outrageous development, since there is no way that YLEO has any mandate to speak or sit in judgement, for either the botanical or aromatherapy community. Further YLEO has elsewhere been heavily criticised for peddling essential oils on the basis of pseudo-science and hazardous practices, and we believe that Popin therefore does not have the supported authority to retain this post (-supposing he's still in it). An initial communiqué from a USP official to Cropwatch (April 2006) indicated that the USP do not intend to define therapeutic /

aromatherapeutic grades of essential oils, despite propaganda suggesting the contrary on YLEO-connected websites.

### **The Disinformation Campaign Spreads – Other Companies emerge selling “Therapeutic Grade Essential Oils.”**

The *DōTerra* company at <http://www.doterraoil.com/oils.html> sell ‘therapeutic grade’ essential oils, repeat the mythical A, B & C grading of essential oils belief with this definition:

“Grade B essential oils are food grade; they may contain synthetics, pesticides, fertilizers, chemical/synthetic extenders, or carrier oils. Grade C oils are perfume grade and may contain the same type of adulterating chemicals as food grade oils. They also usually contain solvents which are used to gain a higher yield of oil.”

*DōTerra’s* view of essential oil quality is bizarre - Grade B essential oils contain fertilisers? Would that be ammonium nitrate, for example, making them potentially explosive? And which food standards authority would permit pesticides & fertilizers in essential oils to be used as food flavouring ingredients - It simply doesn’t make any sense. We are further told that Grade C essential oils are perfume grade and ‘usually contain solvents’ (?). Why does the author think that the perfumery industry would buy such inferior ingredients? Does he/she not realise that ingredient performance in product is directly related to ingredient quality?

According to advertisements seen by Cropwatch, *Essential Therapeutics* also sell the mythical therapeutic grade essential oils via seven listed outlets throughout Australia & Tasmania. *Elizabeth Van Buren Inc.* also advertises oils of the ‘finest & purest therapeutic grade’. Other advertisements we have seen include those from *Mountain Rose Herbs*, *The Ananda Apothecary*, *Somatherapy*, *Anson Aromatic Essentials* (the presumed owner is mentioned above) and many others.

### **Conclusions.**

Potential essential oil buyers should independently check out the marketing information provided by essential oil traders - do not be put off asking for any extra information or reassurances that you are legally entitled to if the situation is not absolutely clear cut. The professional aromatherapist has a duty to be able to provide all relevant safety information relevant to to their clients’ treatment(s) and therefore It is part of ‘due diligence’ to ask questions, require any stipulated proofs, request an MSDS, ask for compositional data & certificate of origin *of the batch of oil purchased* and have their eyes wide open to marketing ploys & scams of all types - including providing GC’MS print-outs and other information which relate to other batches of oils entirely, and, of course, describing essential oils as ‘therapeutic grade’.

Good luck!

*"In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act."*  
*George Orwell (1984).* .

### **References**

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