

Why Are Essential Oils Not Yet Fully Accepted?

by **E. Joan Barice, MD, MPH**

I am proud and honored to call Dr. Barice a good friend, and am thankful for her role as mentor and collaborator with me. --Denise Wickell, LMT, CA, RA

There are a small but growing number of physicians and other health professionals who accept and use essential oils. It is particularly difficult for me, having benefited so much from the use of therapeutic essential oils, to accept the resistance of conventional medicine to them. But as a physician I can understand some of the reasons. Here are some of my thoughts, just one person's thoughts.

The therapeutic use of essential oils is just being rediscovered. It was practiced by ancient cultures such as in China, Egypt and India. There is much documentation in the Scripture and in ancient medical texts of their use. It has only been since the 1940's that the medical benefits of oils were rediscovered and modern research began. There is research confirming the scientific rationale for many ancient uses.

Our modern science does not accept ancient folk use or ancient science, which does not use the same terminology or methods as ours. Our modern science has made much progress and many amazing discoveries that have helped save lives. The ancient Egyptians and other cultures left us evidence of their intelligent science thousands of years old, but it was different from our modern science which is just hundreds of years old.

There is a wealth of modern clinical research demonstrating positive results and safety of the oils for many conditions but many studies lack adequate control groups for comparison. Done by well-intentioned people with expertise in oils but not necessarily in modern clinical research, these studies are mostly not acceptable to modern medicine because of the methods used or small numbers of patients. Clearly essential oils have helped patients with MRSA and relentless pain and many other conditions, from first-aid to intensive care to end-of life-care, and have done no harm. They are being used in many hospitals around the world including many in the United States.

An analogy regarding research evidence would be acupuncture, practiced for thousands of years as folk medicine in China. An NIH (National Institutes of Health) consensus panel reviewed the vast amount of research and concluded that though studies have shortcomings, there is enough evidence of effectiveness and safety in so many patients to recommend it for treatment of back pain, nausea, and other conditions.

Before doctors will accept essential oils for use in patients, most will need large, randomized studies showing effectiveness and safety. There is not much interest on behalf of conventional medicine or drug companies in doing research on essential oils.

In general the medical establishment tends to resist anything new that is not already clearly proven by western research standards. This is nothing new. For example, it took 250 years and many deaths before the medical establishment of that time accepted Vitamin C containing foods as a cure for scurvy.

Funding for research on complementary medicine is limited compared to that available for drug studies. It might be that the oils, which are considerably less costly than drugs, are not likely to be as profitable.

Another reason may be the approach to disease is different for oils vs. most drugs. Oils may help the body heal itself, by releasing substances that promote healing while drugs often substitute for those natural substances and may shut down their production by the body. Sometimes they are so powerful that they overwhelm the body's own healing process, and sometimes, too often, drugs do harm.

The most important thing to consider always is what is best for the patient. As a patient, I have experienced tremendous health benefits using essential oils, and I believe they have much to offer. Which is why I am committed, as a physician and researcher, to doing randomized studies to get the objective answers. In the meantime, I believe these God-given natural remedies have the potential to help a wide variety of conditions from MRSA to burns to chronic pain and much more without doing harm. They have a long track-record of effectiveness, safety and they are inexpensive. When we do not have all the answers how to best help our patients, when a patient may suffer or die because we do not have an effective treatment for him or her, when there is a lot of evidence that oils might do good, and do no harm, then I believe it is justified to use them in medicine. And not to wait until it is too late for that patient.



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