

Axel and Rose win Nobel Prize

Danièle Ryman calls for more work on 'the science of smells'

The work of Axel and Buck, discovering the genes and mechanisms responsible for passing smell information to the brain, is impressive. It increases our understanding of the human body and moreover, is a key step towards understanding the purposes and possibilities of smell. Just as smell triggers an instinctive reaction in animals, it can trigger powerful, if less obvious, responses in humans.



Recognition for what natural practitioners have long claimed

Understanding and explanation lag behind observed phenomenon. Practitioners and researchers like Danièle Ryman, have known for years that certain smells trigger an observable reaction in emotion or behaviour. Axel and Buck have conclusively proved how the smell information is relayed both to the higher cortex and the limbic area of the brain responsible for emotions. Thus a smell can evoke a memory with unrivalled strength. It's little wonder that it can also trigger an emotional response – anything from well-being to relaxation, from sadness to irritability. The recognition received by Axel and Buck should pave the way for a better appreciation of work already done.

More research urgently needed

Twenty years ago the main body of medical opinion refused to believe that the inhalation of essential oils had any effect, despite knowing other volatile compounds obviously had a physiological effect - glue-sniffing, for example! To insist on referring derogatively to aromatherapists as 'alternative' is to ignore what is now very much mainstream science. Although studies have been made on the relaxing effects of lavender, the analgesic effects of clove and the 'stimulating' effects of rosemary, the majority of research remains to be done. Now the areas responsible for processing smell have been pinpointed, we can hope more sophisticated analysis will enable us to perceive at a physiological level the effect of a smell on the brain.

Ignoring the 'science of smell' can be dangerous

It's essential that the science of smells is given the respect it deserves. The belief that aromatherapy is about 'nice smells' is a dangerous misdirection. While some smells are relaxing, there are others which directly stimulate fear, anxiety, over-tiredness – responses which, depending on time and place, could be disastrous. Coriander, for example, is a stimulant in small quantities, but in large doses it leads to extreme drowsiness or can trigger epileptic fits.

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Businesses misusing 'aromatherapy'

While most individual practitioners are extremely responsible, the lack of a unified professional body, training or qualification within aromatherapy is a risk. Even more disturbing are the number of commercial preparations that misuse the term aromatherapy. Synthetic compounds and inferior quality essential oils are not only ineffective, but could be dangerous. Recent research suggests scenting everything from washing-up liquid to toilet cleaners could well be fuelling the rise in allergic reactions amongst children.

**Contact Sam at Project Associates for an expert commentary from Danièle Ryman,
the world's leading authority on aromatherapy.**

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