

(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Aromatherapy in practice: The viewpoint of healthcare professionals

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study conducted to explore the role of aromatherapy in therapeutic practices in Algeria. The study used a targeted survey method involving health professionals and auxiliaries. The questionnaire used in the study was based on a review of the literature on aromatherapy, essential oils, therapeutic practices, alternative medicine, the toxicity of essential oils, regulations and the essential oils market.

The questionnaire was distributed physically in the Algiers region and also shared online via Google Docs and social media platforms. The data collected was initially processed and analysed using Microsoft Excel 2019. The study was conducted over a one-month period, from 25 April to 25 May 2023, and included healthcare professionals and related persons residing and practising in Algeria. Inclusion criteria required individuals to meet at least one of the two conditions, while incomplete or incorrectly completed forms were excluded.

The results of the study showed that a total of 170 responses were collected from healthcare professionals.

The study focused on the awareness and use of herbal products, particularly essential oils, among survey participants.

The study also examined the length of time essential oils were used, the indications for which they were used, and the side effects and adverse reactions reported.

The results highlight the need to improve the scientific literature and remedy the shortage of experts in this field, which can have an impact on the validity and credibility of aromatherapy practices. The study also highlights the importance of education, training and regulation to ensure the safe and effective use of essential oils in a therapeutic context.

Keywords: Aromatherapy; Essential oils; Therapeutic practices; Alternative medicine; Algeria; Survey; Healthcare professionals

1. Introduction

Aromatherapy is a form of alternative medicine that uses essential oils to improve physical, emotional and mental well-being [1,2]. Essential oils, which are obtained mainly by distilling or cold-pressing plants, contain chemical compounds with a variety of therapeutic properties [3,4], including antiseptic [5], anti-inflammatory [6], analgesic [7], relaxing [8], stimulant [9] and many others [10,11].

In therapeutic practices, aromatherapy is used as a complement to traditional medical treatments [12]. It is often integrated into disciplines such as clinical aromatherapy, holistic aromatherapy, naturopathy, traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture [13]. Essential oils can be used in a variety of ways, including inhalation, reduced topical application, aromatic baths and massage [14].

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Although this ancient practice is widely used in many countries [15], it is essential to ask whether it also occupies an important place in therapeutic practices in Algeria, where traditional remedies and natural practices are often favoured, so it is interesting to understand whether aromatherapy is widely used and accepted as a complementary therapeutic approach [16]. Despite its growing popularity worldwide and its health benefits, is aromatherapy integrated into medical disciplines and healthcare in Algeria?

It is also important to examine whether knowledge and understanding of essential oils, their therapeutic properties and uses are competent in the medical field and among health practitioners in Algeria [17]. Are there any specific training courses or health professionals specialising in aromatherapy in the country?

Finally, given the growing importance attached to natural and organic products worldwide, it is worth exploring whether demand for essential oils is also increasing in our country [18]. Are Algerian consumers increasingly being persuaded by alternative therapies and the use of essential oils in their quest for well-being and health? [19]

Main objective

To draw up an inventory of the knowledge of health professionals and the general population regarding aromatherapy and essential oils and their use in care and daily life, in order to have an overall idea of the place of this discipline in therapeutic practices in Algeria.

Secondary objectives

- To assess knowledge of essential oils and aromatherapy : indications, contraindications, methods and forms of administration, side effects, toxicity, etc.
- To gain an idea of the acceptability of this alternative and complementary therapy to the general population.
- Gathering opinions and suggestions from healthcare professionals and others to improve patient care through this practice on the one hand ; and optimising the essential oils circuit from training, manufacture, sale and better use of them on the other.

2. Material and methods

This study was carried out by means of a survey of two target populations, which followed the following process:

2.1. Designing the questionnaire

Distribution of questionnaires using two distinct methods:

- Physical by hand-delivery in paper form (Algiers region) and;
- Digital by internet via Google docs through social networks by sharing the two links [29,30] : « <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1oJl417yIaqF7fxEsMUCgnvxP2oEzhmjpXWwWdMlGwZc/edit#responses> » [Annex (1)]

2.2. Period

From 25 April to 25 May 2023 (duration: one month).

2.3. Inclusion criteria

Any person residing and practising in Algeria and belonging to the health profession: pharmacists, doctors, nurses, traditional practitioners, etc.

2.4. Criteria for non-inclusion

Any person who does not meet at least one of the two previous conditions.

2.5. Exclusion criteria

Any incorrectly completed or incomplete form.

The data collected from the survey is initially processed and analysed using Microsoft Excel (2019). The transition to a more efficient statistical study depends on the quality and quantity of the data [29,30].

2.6. Study biases

These can be summarised in two (02) points

- Few scientifically validated bibliographies on the same subject.
- The absence of an expert in the field who could act as a reference.

3. Results

The responses collected are represented by the figures below (n=170)

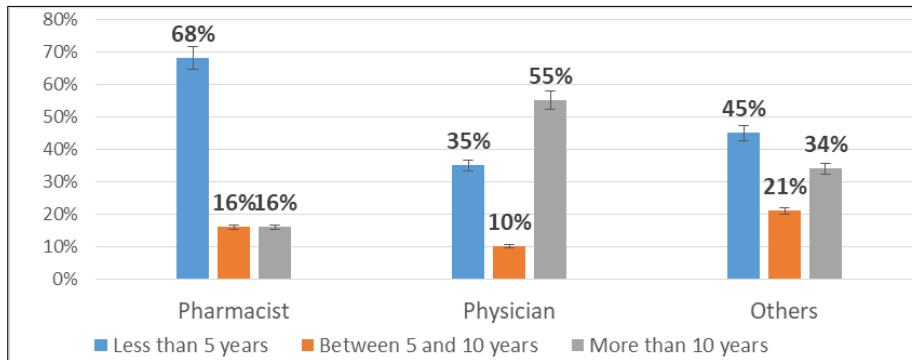


Figure 1 Breakdown of healthcare professionals by category

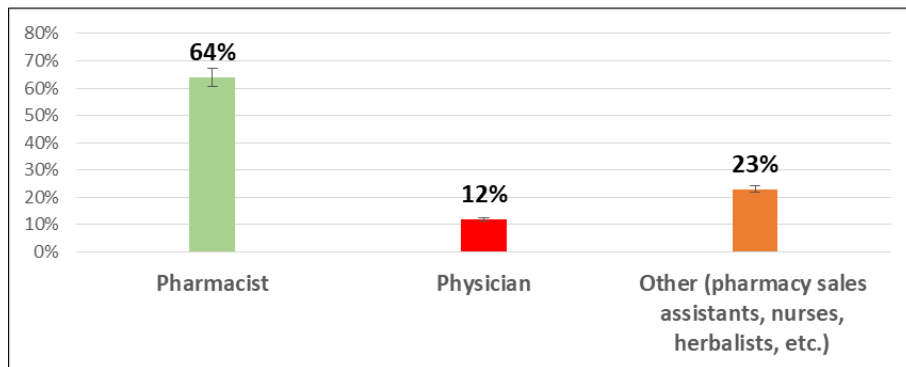


Figure 2 Length of time participants have worked in their respective professions

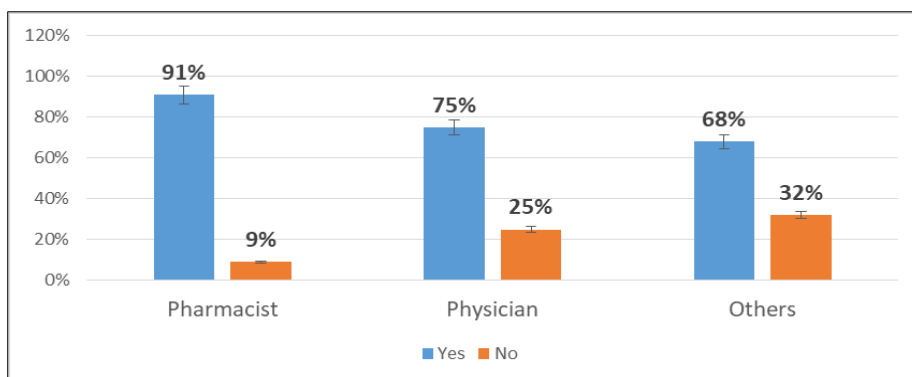


Figure 3 Distribution of healthcare professionals according to whether or not they are familiar with aromatherapy

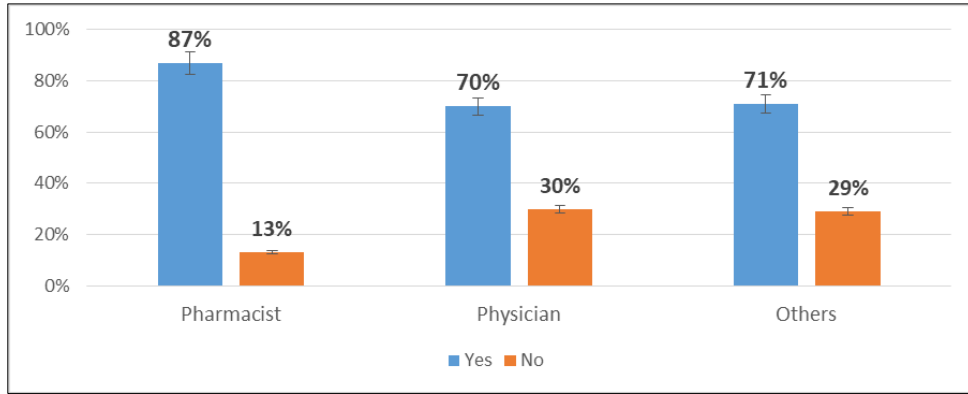


Figure 4 Distinction between essential oils and vegetable oils for health professionals

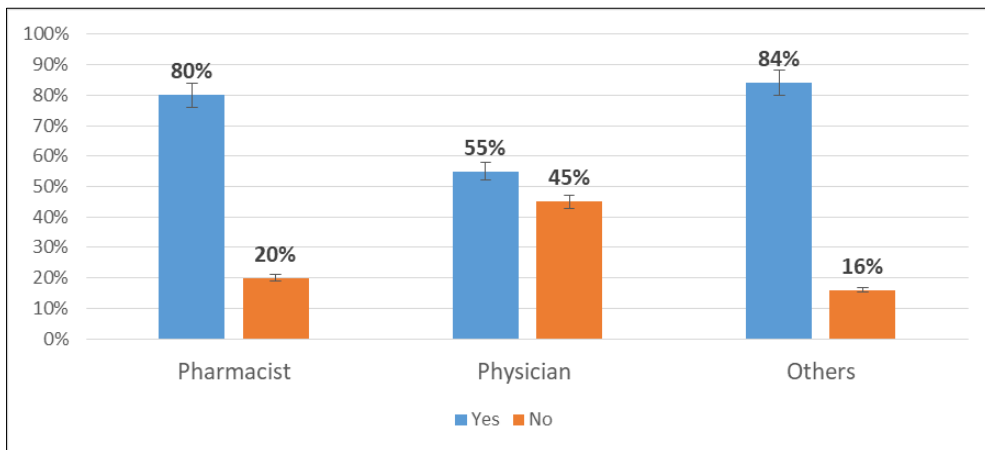


Figure 5 Recommendations for essential oils by category of health professional

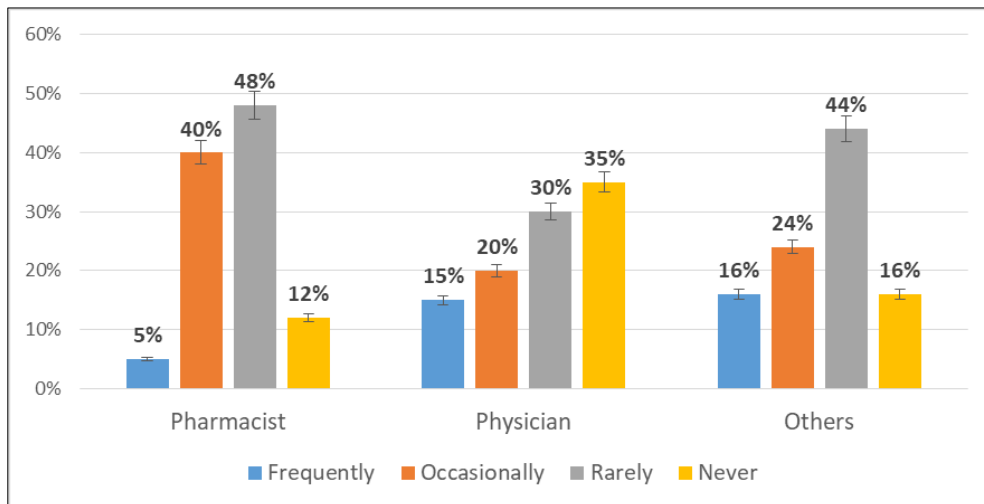


Figure 6 Frequency of essential oil recommendations by health profession

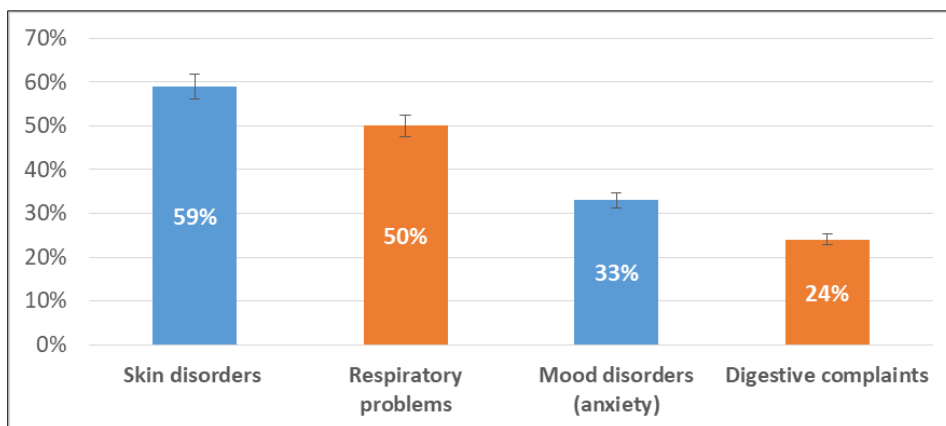


Figure 7 Types of indications recommended by the HP

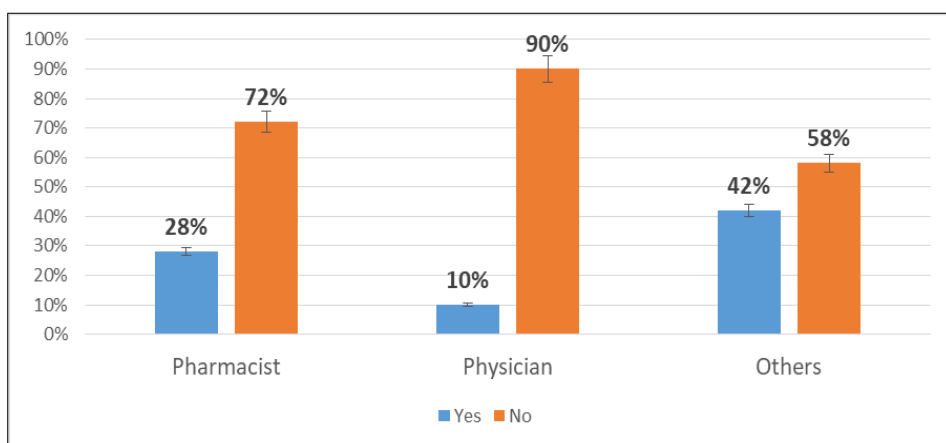


Figure 8 Essential oils recommended as a substitute for medication

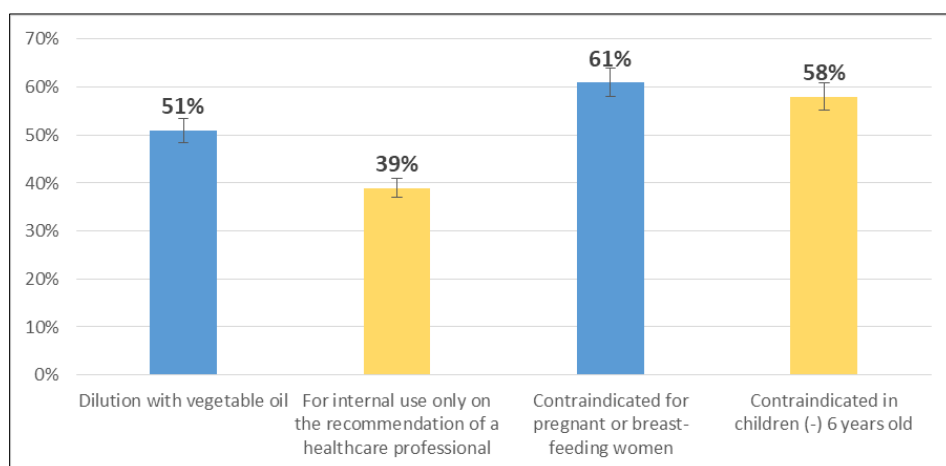


Figure 9 Main precautionary advice from HP for essential oils

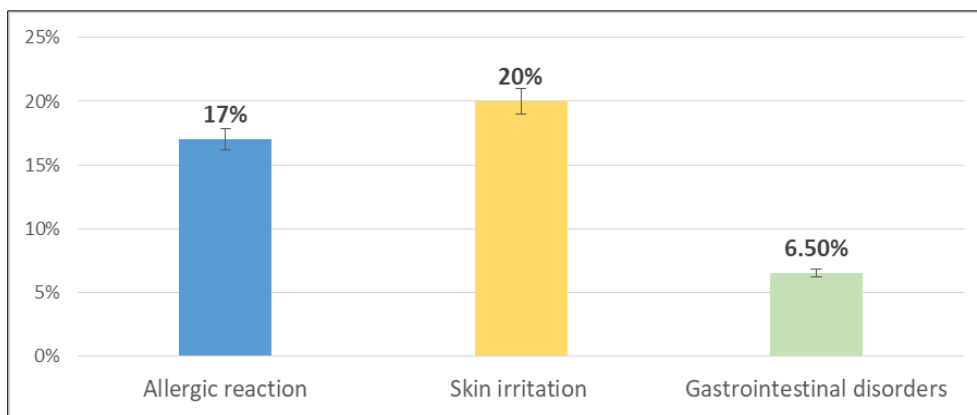


Figure 10 Side effects recorded by Health Professionals

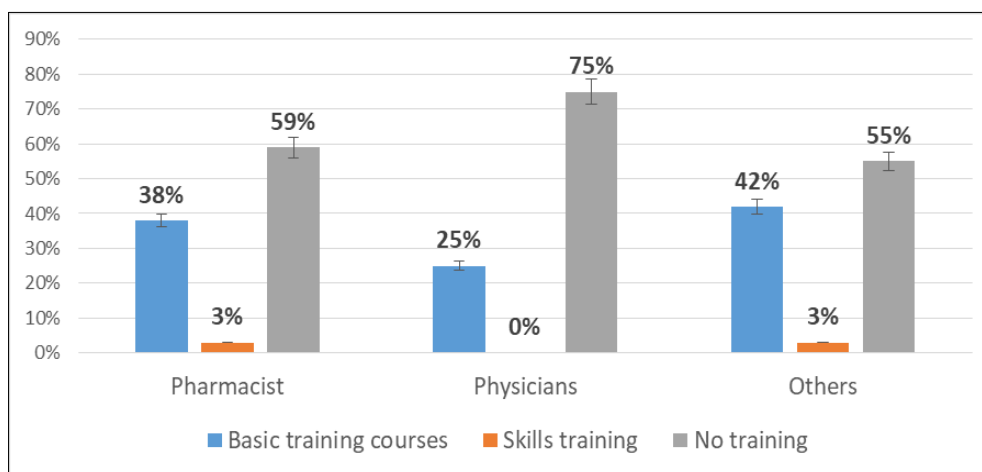


Figure 11 level of training in aromatherapy

4. Discussion

The majority of survey participants were pharmacists (64%), as they are considered to be the primary contacts in this area. Around 50% of respondents have been practising for less than 5 years, indicating that younger people are more likely to be involved in the practice.

Pharmacists have a relatively high level of knowledge of aromatherapy and essential oils. They are also more likely to recommend them, as are pharmacy salespeople. In contrast, only 55% of doctors surveyed recommend their use.

Skin problems are the indications most frequently encountered by healthcare professionals, followed by respiratory problems. However, it is important to note that most healthcare professionals do not recommend an essential oil as a replacement for medication, with only 10% of doctors surveyed doing so on a scientific basis (on a case-by-case basis).

Over 80% of the participants surveyed said that they give advice and explain the precautions to be taken when recommending essential oils, particularly for pregnant and breast-feeding women, and for children under the age of 6.

As far as side effects are concerned, 25% of the healthcare professionals questioned have observed undesirable effects linked to the use of essential oils, which they believe to be mainly due to a lack of information.

Around 60% of the participants surveyed had not received any specific training in aromatherapy, 34% had received basic training and only 6% were qualified in this field. It is therefore clear that there is an ongoing need for training in the field of aromatherapy in order to better develop and provide appropriate advice to patients.

This 2023 study shows a slight evolution in terms of awareness (healthcare professionals and others) and acceptance of the term 'aromatherapy' by participants compared to a similar study conducted by Nabti et al, 2016; where the study revealed that the term 'aromatherapy' is not common: little known among (62%) of individuals, (91%) of doctors, (92%) of pharmacists, and completely unknown among herbalists. While over 76% of the population surveyed, healthcare professionals and herbalists seemed to be familiar with essential oils, and (52%) said they had already used them.

The same study (2016) showed that essential oils are rarely prescribed (9% of doctors) or poorly advised in pharmacies (33% of pharmacists) due to a lack of knowledge about aromatherapy : (94%) of doctors and (75%) of pharmacists do not know the difference between an essential oil and a vegetable oil.

5. Conclusion

This study made it possible to examine, at the level of our sample, the place of aromatherapy in therapeutic practices in Algeria. The results highlighted a growing interest in the use of essential oils and aromatherapy among the general population and certain healthcare professionals. However, a number of challenges were identified, including the lack of solid scientific literature, the need for qualified training, the need for stricter regulations and the importance of increased availability of quality products.

There are several possible avenues for developing this field in Algeria. Firstly, it is essential to offer in-depth training in essential oils and aromatherapy, covering various aspects such as methods of use, dosage, side effects and toxicity. This training can be aimed at healthcare professionals and others involved in this field.

Secondly, it is important to popularise this practice and make it more accessible to the general public. This can be achieved by disseminating medical information via traditional means such as brochures and conferences, as well as via social media, which have become a powerful tool for disseminating information.

Thirdly, it is vital to strengthen the regulatory framework, from the manufacturing process through to the dispensing of products to patients and users. This will guarantee the quality and safety of essential oils available on the market by ensuring that they reveal a certified biological identity, using labelled products and providing a summary of product characteristics. It is also important to make these products economically accessible to the general public.

Finally, an interesting prospect would be to introduce aromatherapy into hospital care, as a complementary therapy. The antiseptic and antimicrobial properties of essential oils could find their place in the sterilisation of operating theatres, helping to improve hospital practices.

In short, aromatherapy has the potential to play an important role in therapeutic practices in Algeria. However, to maximise its use and benefits, it is essential that steps are taken to ensure its safe and effective use in the Algerian healthcare system.

Finally, it would be interesting to carry out other large-scale surveys without omitting any aspect, in particular the opinion of manufacturers operating in the cosmetics, dermocosmetics and pharmaceutical fields.

Compliance with ethical standards

Acknowledgments

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors and all co-authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest in connection with this document.

Statement of ethical approval

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animals/humans subjects by any of the authors.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Annex (1): Questionnaire for health professionals and auxiliaries

AROMATHERAPY IN PRACTICE : THE VIEWPOINT OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS
< QUESTIONNAIRE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND AUXILIARIES >

This questionnaire is a field survey aimed at health professionals and auxiliaries, on the place of aromatherapy in therapeutic practices in Algeria.
The aim is to obtain an overview of knowledge about the frequency with which essential oils are prescribed, their indications, undesirable effects and possible toxicity.

<p>1. What is your profession ? a. Doctor b. Nurse c. Pharmacist d. Other (please specify)</p> <p>2. How long have you worked in your profession ? a. Less than 5 years b. Between 5 and 10 years c. More than 10 years d. Other</p> <p>3. Are you familiar with Aromatherapy ? a. Yes b. No</p> <p>4. Do you know the difference between essential oils and vegetable oils ? a. Yes b. No</p> <p>5. Have you ever recommended essential oils ? a. Yes b. No</p> <p>6. How often do you recommend the use of essential oils ? a. Often (75%) b. Occasionally (50%) c. Rarely (25%) d. Never (0%)</p> <p>7. How would you rate the availability of essential oils in Algeria ? a. Available (easy to find) b. Poorly available (difficult to find) c. Not available</p> <p>8. For what indications do you generally recommend essential oils ? (several answers possible) a. Digestive disorders b. Respiratory problems c. Skin disorders d. Mood/anxiety disorders e. Other (please specify)</p>	<p>9. Do you recommend the use of essential oil as a replacement for medication ? a. Yes b. No c.</p> <p>10. Do you recommend any precautions when using essential oils ? a. Yes b. No</p> <p>11. If yes, what type of precautions do you advise ? a. Dilute the preparation (vegetable oil...) b. Use internally only on the recommendation of a health professional c. Avoid use in children under 6 years of age d. Avoid use by pregnant or breast-feeding women e. Other (please specify)</p> <p>12. Have you experienced any side effects from using essential oils ? a. Yes b. No</p> <p>13. Which side effects ? a. Skin irritation b. Allergic reaction c. Gastrointestinal problems d. Other (please specify)</p> <p>14. What is your level of training in aromatherapy ? a. No training b. Basic training (a few hours) c. Qualifying training (certificate)</p> <p>15. Do you have any suggestions for improving the use of essential oils in clinical practice ? a. Yes b. No</p> <p>16. Which ones ?</p>
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