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Aromatherapy as a safe and effective treatment for the management of agitation in severe dementia: the results of a double-blind, placebo-controlled trial with Melissa.

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BACKGROUND: Behavioral and psychological symptoms in dementia are frequent and are a major management problem, especially for patients with severe cognitive impairment. Preliminary reports have indicated positive effects of aromatherapy using select essential oils, but there are no adequately powered placebo-controlled trials. We conducted a placebo-controlled trial to determine the value of aromatherapy with essential oil of *Melissa officinalis* (lemon balm) for agitation in people with severe dementia. **METHOD:** Seventy-two people residing in National Health Service (U.K.) care facilities who had clinically significant agitation in the context of severe dementia were randomly assigned to aromatherapy with *Melissa* essential oil (N = 36) or placebo (sunflower oil) (N = 36). The active treatment or placebo oil was combined with a base lotion and applied to patients' faces and arms twice a day by caregiving staff. Changes in clinically significant agitation (Cohen-Mansfield Agitation Inventory [CMAI]) and quality of life indices (percentage of time spent socially withdrawn and percentage of time engaged in constructive activities, measured with Dementia Care Mapping) were compared between the 2 groups over a 4-week period of treatment. **RESULTS:** Seventy-one patients completed the trial. No significant side effects were observed. Sixty percent (21/35) of the active treatment group and 14% (5/36) of the placebo-treated group experienced a 30% reduction of CMAI score, with an overall improvement in agitation (mean reduction in CMAI score) of 35% in patients receiving *Melissa* balm essential oil and 11% in those treated with placebo (Mann-Whitney U test; Z = 4.1, p < .0001). Quality of life indices also improved significantly more in people receiving essential balm oil (Mann-Whitney U test; percentage of time spent socially withdrawn: Z = 2.6, p = .005; percentage of time engaged in constructive activities: Z = 3.5, p = .001). **CONCLUSION:** The finding that aromatherapy with essential balm oil is a safe and effective treatment for clinically significant agitation in people with severe dementia, with additional benefits for key quality of life parameters, indicates the need for further controlled trials.

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