



# The effectiveness of spikenard essential oil in the management of agitation and distress in end-of-life care

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## Project background

This particular project took place at the North Devon Hospice, a hospice containing a seven-bed inpatient unit where approximately 60% of patients are admitted for symptom management and 40% for end-of-life care. The complementary therapy manager at the hospice attended a national conference for complementary therapists where she heard a presentation that claimed the essential oil spikenard could, among many other things, help to alleviate symptoms of terminal agitation in the dying. Spikenard is a herb of the valerian family and is commonly used in Eastern and Ayurvedic medicine. It is classified as a hypnosedative and claims to soothe anxieties, installing a great sense of calm by harmonising the physical, emotional and spiritual, and helping people to let go of fear and old emotional wounds.

## Aim

The aim of the project was to establish whether spikenard essential oil could be used as an effective means of managing end-of-life agitation and distress, thus reducing the need for sedative medication to calm patients and helping them to make the best of their remaining time. To achieve this, the objectives identified were to:

- Engage key stakeholders in the project
- Devise and work in accordance with a formal study protocol
- Obtain ethics committee approval
- Provide the information and opportunity for discussion necessary to obtain informed consent
- Instigate the study
- Evaluate all data captured

## Implications for practice

- Workshops or time away from practice in a safe place and with ground rules can provide a space for people to speak freely and honestly, to express ideas, to hear the ideas and thoughts of others and to feel part of a process that is working towards a solution
- There is value in incorporating creative activities into an otherwise serious workplace to free up people's thinking and engage stakeholders
- Before embarking on a project it is important to think carefully about the need for ethics committee approval, as this is a lengthy process and, in this case, affected the development of the project as a team effort

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## Online

Further information about the project can be accessed from: [fons.org/library/report-details?nstdid=72403](https://fons.org/library/report-details?nstdid=72403)

## Key activities and outcomes

### • The steering group

The steering group was open to anyone who wanted to join and ended up comprising a clinical team leader, a deputy clinical team leader, a staff nurse, a healthcare assistant, the head of education, a consultant and a complementary therapy manager. The group devised the protocol, the information leaflets, consent forms, and assessments, and was responsible for the application to the ethics committee.

### • Workshops for engaging staff on the inpatient team

Once the protocol and ethics approval were in place, it became imperative to engage staff on the inpatient unit. To do this, two workshops were planned and all staff were rostered to attend. The idea was they would be given time and space in which to think without the usual interruptions and distractions. The FoNS facilitator worked with the team to develop a vision for the care of people at the end of life, and then undertook a claims, concerns and issues exercise to think about the evaluation of spikenard in practice.

### • Engaging key stakeholders in the hospice

Due to the large number of key stakeholders, an information stall was set up just outside the café at midday. To advertise the event, flyers were delivered to each department and an email sent to every member of staff. The team made a display of giant poster boards to catch people's eyes as they walked to lunch and the project team members were available to discuss the project further. A free bag of chocolates was given to anyone who came to the spikenard information stall and people seemed genuinely interested.

### • Forum theatre events

In order to prepare staff and equip them with the skills to have a potentially difficult conversation about using spikenard at the end of life, the head of education suggested using 'forum theatre' as a means of demonstrating how this kind of conversation might best be conducted. The idea is that two people enact a scene and then the audience is invited to comment on what they have observed, and to suggest how the actors might do things better. Eventually the process leads to members of the audience being invited to participate by taking the place of one of the actors and enacting their own suggestions for improving or resolving situations. The events enabled a useful discussion in a new and memorable way and encouraged members of the team to work together.

### • Outcomes

Unfortunately, to date no patients have agreed to take part in the study, although several patients have agreed to consider it. This means the project has not yet progressed in the way that had been anticipated. However, it has brought the benefits of improved multidisciplinary teamworking and personal growth and development of the team.

IMPROVEMENT INSIGHTS