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PRIMARY COLOUR

Helen Salisbury: The time is now

Helen Salisbury *GP*

Whenever I hear discussions about patients being too quick to call a doctor, and how their failure to self-manage is adding to NHS workloads, I'm reminded of patients who didn't call until it was too late. We've all met people like this, who found reasons not to seek help and then presented with end stage cancer. The reasons they give themselves for delaying so long are many and varied, and reluctance to bother the doctor is often among them.

There is also fear, both of the diagnosis and of the treatment to follow: having heard about major surgery, constant nausea, hair loss, and fatigue, they find it too overwhelming to contemplate, so they ignore the steadily growing lump in their breast, the rectal bleeding, or the weight loss. Sometimes they may wrongly assume that their fate is sealed anyway, that there's nothing to be done. Initially this is untrue, but the longer they wait, the more likely it is that care will be palliative rather than curative.

There's a parallel here with the climate emergency. The alarm has been sounding for 30 years—at first softly, when few were listening, but now loudly, shrilly, and impossible to ignore. As a society we have refused to contemplate the treatment we need, and as time progresses and the situation worsens, that treatment becomes more urgent and more radical. Stopping the burning of fossil fuels and the destruction of forests is imperative if we want our children and grandchildren to have an Earth fit for human habitation.

Unlike the patient with cancer, the consequences of climate change denial and inaction are often borne by others, and the world's poorer, low lying coastal regions will bear the first impacts of rising sea levels caused by the rich North's reckless use of carbon. As an individual, it's easy to succumb to fatalism: it's all too late, and what can I do anyway? I can recycle my plastic, cycle to work, buy an electric car, and even change the inhalers I prescribe, but this seems wholly inadequate.

As well as individual steps, we need action at a national and international level, freed from the lobbying and disinformation of the fossil fuel industry. Few politicians are brave enough to prescribe the medicine this planet needs and to implement the radical policies required for carbon reduction—and, as they can't do it alone, all eyes are pinned on COP26 (the UN Climate Change Conference) to see if they can collectively summon the sense and willpower to go for cure, not just palliative care, for our planet.

As citizens, we need to apply pressure to let them know that this is our priority. What can an individual do? More than you think: see Greta Thunberg for details.

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