The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

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COP26 diary: a moment among the business people

In his third report from COP26, Richard Smith hears how no institution or company can decarbonise alone

Richard Smith *chair*

Sunday 7 November

Sunday is a rest day for those attending COP26, which I'm sure must be much appreciated by people who have travelled across oceans and must each day rise before dawn, do their lateral flow tests, register it with the NHS, travel (often in the rain) from far-flung parts of Scotland, and pass through all the security hoops before spending a day negotiating, debating, listening, arguing, advocating, speaking, or wondering why exactly they are here.

Just as the Edinburgh Festival has the fringe festival, the book festival, and the television festival, COP has side events, and I have been invited to one of them: the Investment COP. I'm going to facilitate a discussion among two health people and two business people, all of whom are interested in decarbonising health systems. We'd had a premeeting by Zoom, but I'd forgotten a lot of the details, including when exactly the meeting was supposed to start. As it was Sunday and I vaguely remembered that the meeting was late morning, I spent an hour reading before looking at the details of the meeting. I realised a) that the meeting was sooner than I thought, b) that I was in danger of missing it, and c) that I wasn't sure exactly where it was happening. The result was anxiety, discomfort, and no breakfast and no coffee as I caught the train to the meeting.

As is so often the case with attending conferences, one of my most interesting meetings came from asking a woman the way to the Hilton Hotel. She told me that she was going there and that I was walking in the wrong direction. I learnt that she invested a pension fund, invested in green companies, took great care to ensure that they weren't greenwashing, and as a result made excellent financial returns. That there is money to be made by investing in green companies (and money to be lost by investing in fossil fuels) may be what saves us, although Greta Thunberg would be sceptical.

The Blue Zone of COP26 has plenty of people in suits and ties, but they are diluted by people in native and indigenous clothes, including head-dresses, and scruffs like me. At the business meeting you must look sharp, even if it's smart casual Silicon Valley style. People don't want to invest in scruffs.

The most interesting part of my session is before the session starts. I sit next to the chief sustainability officer of Novartis, one of the world's largest pharmaceutical drug companies. Is the company really serious about getting to net zero, or is this greenwashing? I quiz the chief sustainability officer. Have they measured their total carbon footprint, including what they consume from their suppliers?

They have and do. Do they publish their footprint? They do. How long have they been publishing it? Three years. Is measurement of their footprint based on financial data? Much of it has been, but they are getting better (as is everybody: measuring carbon footprints is a developing science). As with the NHS, the largest part of the company's footprint is from suppliers. Are they requiring suppliers to get to net zero? They are. Does she have a budget? Yes. Does she have people? They are spread throughout the company. Does the board regularly consider the carbon footprint? It does. Are her data audited by a third party? They are, but the big auditing firms need to improve their capacity to audit carbon footprints. Does being sustainable give competitive advantage? Maybe, but it's essential.

I judge that Novartis is doing well, although I haven't scrutinised their data. I must.

The message that emerges from the discussion I facilitate is that we must work with each other. The carbon footprint of health systems is mostly the footprint of their suppliers whose footprint in turn is mostly the footprints of their suppliers ad infinitum. No institution or company can decarbonise alone.

After the meeting I walk to the Kelvingrove Art Gallery only to discover it's sealed off as a COP venue. It's hard to walk 10 yards in Glasgow without seeing some sign of COP26. Rebuffed by the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, I walk away only to see a sign to the Hunterian Art Gallery, the art gallery of Glasgow University, which I know from an article in the *London Review of Books* has an exhibition of the drawings and paintings of Joan Eardley, a Scottish artist, although English born, who is gradually gaining the reputation she deserves as one of Britain's leading painters of the 20th century.¹ Eardley, who died young of breast cancer in 1963, had two main subjects: moving but far from sentimental pictures of the children of Glasgow's slums in the 1950s, and expressionist paintings of the sea and storms of Scotland's East coast. A green notice attached to a picture of a storm points out that with climate change seas will rise and storms become stronger. Climate change is everywhere.

Competing interests: Richard Smith is the chair of the UKHACC and is former editor in chief of *The BMJ*.

¹ Smith R. The painter of winter storms. Wordpress. 29 August 2021. <https://richardswsmith.wordpress.com/2021/08/29/the-painter-of-winter-storms/>