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PRIMARY COLOUR

Helen Salisbury: New Year's revolutions?

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As the season turns and the days begin to lengthen, it is traditional to look back at the year just past and think about what we might do to make the coming one better. Usually, the promises we make to ourselves concern our own health and happiness: I will eat less, exercise more, give up alcohol, or even take up mindfulness. But now is also the time to look at what is important in the wider world and to think about where we are spending our energy.

The urgent problems that are crying out for change, from the climate crisis to health inequalities, can seem too big to be affected by the actions of individuals. It is tempting to consign them to the depths of my mental inbox, where any issues “too difficult to think about just now” habitually lurk. But each revolution starts with a single step, and unless I make concrete plans during this brief pause in the turning seasons, nothing will change.

At our practice we have made a small start in reducing carbon emissions by switching from metered dose inhalers (MDIs) to the more environmentally friendly dry powder ones whenever we can.¹ One calculation gives the carbon footprint of a salbutamol MDI as equivalent to driving from London to Sheffield (175 miles), compared with just a four mile journey if you use the dry powder version. We need more information like this to inform our choices while putting our patients at the centre of these decisions, and the Greener Practice website is a good place to start.²

There are some stark health inequalities in the UK, such as a gap of 19 years of healthy life expectancy between the most and the least deprived areas.³ GPs have been asked to look at inequalities in our own practice populations and to come up with ways to tackle them. There is a temptation to throw our hands up in despair at the size of the task, and at our own powerlessness, as so much of this difference is down to wealth and opportunity rather than healthcare. Alternatively, however, we could accept the invitation to think about how we can improve the uptake of cancer screening among our more disadvantaged patients or improve access to appointments for people with disabilities.

In our practice there will be no grand New Year's revolution. But I resolve to raise my head above the keyboard and think beyond the daily firefighting needed to keep the surgery staffed and functioning. I will try to see the bigger picture. I will also stop eating all of the biscuits in reception—or at least contribute more often to the tin.

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1 Janson C, Henderson R, Löfdahl M, Hedberg M, Sharma R, Wilkinson AJK. Carbon footprint impact of the choice of inhalers for asthma and COPD. *Thorax* 2020;75:82-4. doi: 10.1136/thoraxjnl-2019-213744 PMID: 31699805

2 Greener Practice. Reducing waste in health care. <https://www.greenerpractice.co.uk/reducing-waste-in-health-care>

3 Health Foundation. Inequalities. <https://www.health.org.uk/topics/inequalities>