



Doctors for Extinction Rebellion

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What would it take for you to protest about the climate emergency?

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If you opened a print copy of *The BMJ* a couple of weeks ago, you might have seen a colleague of yours alongside the headline “Doctors act to fulfil duty of care in the climate crisis.”¹ The *Sunday Express* covered the same story with the headline, “Eco medics use glue in ‘unhealthy oil’ showdown outside Downing Street.”²

I was one of those “eco medics,” along with Fiona Godlee, former editor in chief of *The BMJ*. 10 of us were glued hand to wrist, like a human daisy chain, while she addressed the crowd of 50 supporting health professionals and confused tourists outside the heavily policed main gates. Godlee read out our requests on a portable PA system: stop supporting the fossil fuel industry with £10bn a year of taxpayers’ money and stop issuing licenses to new oil and gas projects, which government advisers have said will have no impact on internationally set fuel prices.^{3,4}

The protest followed two open letters—with the exact same requests—from the British Medical Association and many of the royal colleges. The first, called the Healthy Climate Prescription, was published in October 2021 alongside a video entitled “Our handwriting may be bad, but our message is clear.”⁵ The second, in support of the Stop Cambo campaign, was published in February 2022.⁶ In that letter, Andrew Goddard, president of the Royal College of Physicians, said⁷: “It seems utterly wrong that at a time when the role of fossil fuels in climate change is better understood than ever, that anyone should think that drilling for oil is a good thing. The climate change we are witnessing is on a scale that is already harming health and will only get worse. Any short term profits will soon be forgotten by everyone living with the consequences.”

Since then, however, the government has done the opposite. It extended the Cambo oil field license in March of this year, licensed the Jackdaw oil field in May, and then gave oil and gas companies huge tax deductions if they expand drilling in the North Sea, which the chief executive officer of Orcadian Energy said “has transformed the attractiveness of domestic oil and gas projects.”^{8,9} The open letters may as well have been returned stamped, “Your opinion is not welcome.”

After the speeches at the recent protest had ended, we sat there in relative immobility for five hours, aided by prophylactic loperamide, super absorbent nappies, and a caring colleague who periodically poured water into our mouths like chicks in a nest. Even though we blocked Downing Street, a road with much significance, the police didn’t arrest us, despite arresting a protester there within minutes just a few months before. As such, our protest received little mainstream media coverage.

So, what are health institutions to do, given that their letters, however powerfully written, are so easily disregarded? What are us “eco medics” to do, given that our protests are not generating mainstream debate? What are we all to do when we are headed for a catastrophic increase in global temperatures, and global leaders are looking the other way?

To our health institutions: I ask that you escalate from writing letters to leading protests. Non-disruptive, mass participation protests that show the government that you are serious in your concerns about climate. I also ask that you work to influence party manifestos being developed for the next general election in 2024. Imagine a non-partisan campaign led by the royal colleges targeting swing seats, asking people to vote based on the best climate and health policies.

To general practices and hospitals: I ask that you use waiting rooms to advertise climate friendly behaviours, such as plant based diets and going on holiday closer to home. I ask that you prioritise these posters over other health issues, even though the climate emergency is not yet as emotive to many people.

To all readers: I ask that you consider taking the next step in your climate journey, whether that is speaking with your friends and family, joining Greener Practice, or joining a protest group yourself. We need everyone we can get. This summer the UK experienced record temperatures, exceeding 40°C for the first time. How bad would climate change have to get for you to join the protest?

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