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TALKING POINT

John Launer: Doctors as activists

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Doctor activists are in the news. Sarah Benn, a former GP from Birmingham, has had her medical licence suspended for five months after being arrested for taking part in peaceful protests by Just Stop Oil.¹ Medical members of the Extinction Rebellion movement have served jail sentences for taking part in peaceful protests about the climate emergency: they now face disciplinary hearings to determine whether they'll be struck off.² It's tempting to think that medical activism is new, but it isn't. There's a distinguished history of doctors, some of them eminent, putting their medical careers and reputations at risk by making social action a priority.³

As it happens, two books I've just finished recount the stories of such doctors, and they provide examples for us all. *Chekhov's Sakhalin Journey* by Jonathan Cole⁴ describes a journey made by the great Russian dramatist and doctor to investigate an appalling penal colony set up in the 19th century on the island of Sakhalin, off the east coast of Siberia. Cole is a professor of neurophysiology who has clearly been mesmerised by this episode, visiting Sakhalin twice himself (once during its near Arctic winter) in collaboration with an actor who produced a theatrical piece based on Chekhov's mission.

Cole writes that Chekhov expected his dramas and short stories to be forgotten within a few years, but what he hoped would endure was the work he did to improve the lot of the peasants, exiles, and convicts who populated the Russian empire in their millions. Chekhov's account of Sakhalin conveys a harrowing impression of squalor, degradation, crime, corruption, disease, child prostitution, and much else—matching similar testimonies from the British penal colonies in Australia.⁵ Partly through his ironic and detached writing style, Chekhov seems to have evaded reprisals for his exposé, a significant risk in tsarist Russia. But, as Cole writes, “To have made the trip—and survived—marked Chekhov forever.”

The second book is from closer to home but attests to the same kind of moral commitment. Richard Stone was a prominent GP in London's Notting Hill, an activist in race relations, and a personal friend. He was also a panel member of the public inquiry into policing in London during the 1990s. This arose from the murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager killed by a gang of white fascists.⁶ The findings led to accusations of institutional racism in the police force. Richard's fight for racial justice wasn't his only campaign: among other achievements he uncovered a “homes for votes” scandal in the London Borough of Westminster, which forced its council leader to refund £12m.⁷

Richard's recent death prompted me to read the book he'd written about his experiences on the Lawrence inquiry, intentionally breaching a convention that activities behind the scenes should be veiled in silence. In his book he expressed his belief that racism, accompanied by deceit, corruption, and obfuscation, had pervaded not only the investigation into Stephen Lawrence's murder but also the inquiry itself, as well as police and government behaviour for years afterwards. Seemingly, this still continues.^{8,9}

I suspect that many doctors, like me, have never been bold enough to act like these people or the doctors currently facing GMC tribunals, but we are in awe of their courage in taking personal and professional risks for such causes.

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