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Doctors and Extinction Rebellion

Three of us retired GPs were arrested at the Extinction Rebellion demonstration in Edinburgh in April. We had the preliminary hearing in the Magistrate’s Court and pleaded not guilty in order to have the opportunity to explain in court why we believe that it is part of a doctor’s responsibility to speak out about the climate crisis.

The GMC states that it is the duty of a doctor to ‘*protect and promote the health of patients and the public*’.¹ We are in the midst of a public health emergency and the government and our professional bodies need to respond appropriately.

As people in the post-employment phase of our lives, we are liberated from concerns about job references and CVs, and are able to take action to encourage the government and others to act. It was a privilege to share the street with so many committed, mainly young, people stating publicly the Extinction Rebellion demands for the government to tell the truth about climate change, for zero carbon by 2025, and for a Citizens’ Assembly. The briefings, organisation, and behaviour were exemplary.

Our charge was breach of the peace, causing distress or alarm to members of the public. This we did not do; we engaged them in conversation, we shared views and sometimes chocolate, and we appreciated the traffic-free silence of Princes Street. As GPs we are trained to see beneath the mask, to make human connection, and several young people, new to protest and nervous, were encouraged by us reminding them that under the police uniforms were curious, often young, people who potentially shared our views.

The procedure for being arrested was time-consuming and tedious rather than intimidating and the laborious processing at the cells invoked sympathy for the courteous and professional young officers struggling with aged and misbehaving computers. We shared our morning at the Magistrates’ Court with various interesting characters and my kind GP friend provided a therapeutic hug for a young woman distressed by her imminent court appearance.

We are used to dealing with individual distress and taking action to alleviate it. But we also have responsibility for

the public’s health, the health of our communities, and the global community. Doctors who have chosen to become active in organisations like Medact (<https://www.medact.org/>) or Doctors for Extinction Rebellion (<https://www.doctorsforxr.com/>) recognise this. Sitting down in the street or joining a campaigning organisation may not be everyone’s cup of tea but we can all contribute, by talking to others in our workplaces, pubs, and clubs, by writing, and by engaging our political representatives.

As individual doctors we can have an effect (promoting eating healthy local food, encouraging people out of cars and into exercise is good not only for individual patients but also for the planet) but, collectively, we can be so much more effective. The BMA, the *Lancet*, medical colleges, the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, and the People’s Health Movement in the UK are speaking out strongly about climate change. As the organisation with responsibility for ethics, education, and regulation of doctors, the GMC states that, in order to maintain trust, doctors should:

‘Be honest and open and act with integrity.’¹

Which is what many of its members are doing; they are taking steps to bring to public attention the public health crisis threatened by climate change.

It would be very helpful if the GMC would speak out, declare a public health emergency, and make it clear that they are interested, not just in the actions and fitness to practise of individual doctors, but also in the underlying system that creates and necessitates those actions.

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