



*“There was a palpable feeling that we did have agency to make decisions about our future and we could act to create the type of world we all want to live in.”*

### Extinction Rebellion: radical or rational?

The UK government has declared a climate change emergency.<sup>1</sup> Respected fellow GPs have been arrested on actions with Extinction Rebellion. Initially I was perplexed by this and wondered how they came to take this course of action. Although I have friends who have tried to fly less and become vegan for environmental purposes, I had never really given serious thought to climate change and its consequences, let alone participate in any climate activism. I’m not really sure I have rebelled in many things in my life at all. Over the Easter holidays, though, I found myself repeatedly at Extinction Rebellion’s blockades in Central London with my young son and husband (a paediatric trainee).

Now I find myself spending time helping to organise a group of doctors and healthcare professionals in support of Extinction Rebellion. In the space of a few weeks, I have gone from being a respected professional to taking on the role of what some people would describe as a radical activist.

A Master’s degree in Public Health and Development at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine has stretched my horizons about the different dimensions of health. I hadn’t previously considered that climate change had major ramifications for public health and was startled by the evidence presented on my course about the influence of transnational corporations fuelling doubt on this issue and permitting the inaction we see today. It is frightening to realise how bleak the future will be for my son’s generation.

Like many GPs, I feel passionate about striving to improve the quality of life for my patients and the community. However, I have come to realise that the significant developments we are making in thinking around multimorbidity, and improving equity to health and prevention, are completely overshadowed by the unrecognised elephant in the room: climate and ecological breakdown.

In March, a doctor colleague posted a video on social media and invited viewers to join her, with her husband, two primary-school-age children, and grandparents, to the International Rebellion at Parliament Square in April. I saw an advert for a local talk about Extinction Rebellion and within a few days my family and I had participated in our first action — a bike ride through the

streets of Hackney dressed as bees.

We arrived nervously at Marble Arch on the first day of the Rebellion, not really knowing what to expect and how long we would stay. I was taken aback by the calm, welcoming atmosphere and the respectful behaviour towards the police and vice versa. There was a palpable feeling that we did have agency to make decisions about our future and we could act to create the type of world we all want to live in.

We kept coming back to the road blockades. We played football on the four-lane roundabout of Marble Arch and we turned Waterloo Bridge into a playground. As we cycled blissfully through the clean, quiet streets of a car-free Central London, the impossible suddenly seemed possible.

The youth climate marches led by Greta Thunberg have been an inspiration. For decades, well-intentioned, well-resourced people and organisations have worked hard to try to change our society’s attitudes and actions towards the environment. This hasn’t worked. Although I have no desire to be arrested, I now fully support mass participation in non-violent civil disobedience on this issue when faced with government inaction. The individual decisions that led to over 1000 arrests in April at the Extinction Rebellion blockades now seem understandable, logical, and rational.

Extinction Rebellion has three demands of our government:

- 1. Tell the Truth.** Government must continue to tell the truth after declaring a climate and ecological emergency, working with other institutions to communicate the urgency for change.
- 2. Act Now.** Government must act now to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025.
- 3. Go Beyond Politics.** Government must create and be led by the decisions of a Citizens’ Assembly on climate and ecological justice.

Let us use our voices to ensure this is acted upon to protect the health of our communities.

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#### REFERENCE

1. UK parliament declares climate change emergency. *BBC News* 2019; **1 May**: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-48126677> [accessed 10 Jun 2019].