

Suspended UK climate activist physician will not stop protesting

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Last month, Dr. Sarah Benn became the first UK doctor to be suspended from the medical register after being convicted and jailed for actions relating to climate activism.

In an interview with *The BMJ*, she says the activism that led to her suspension was necessary to raise the alarm over the climate crisis, and also in keeping with a doctor's mission to promote health and save lives.

"The world is facing an unprecedented crisis due to the danger of climate and [ecological collapse](#), and I believe that my actions are a justified and proportionate effort to raise an alarm about the severity and urgency of the situation," she tells journalist Adele Waters.

Benn explains that two years ago she engaged in peaceful protests to stop the government from granting new oil licenses. She stood holding a protest placard outside the Kingsbury Oil Terminal in Warwickshire in breach of an injunction, which specifically prohibited protests against the production and use of fossil fuels outside the terminal.

After two breaches, Benn spent eight days on remand in custody, and after breaching it again in September 2022 she was jailed for 32 days for contempt of court.

The tribunal emphasized that professional rules do not prevent doctors from engaging in peaceful protests but do require them to comply with the law. It concluded that Benn's conduct fell short of the standards of conduct that should be reasonably expected of a doctor, which amounted to misconduct.

Benn is resigned to the risk that more protests will bring further brushes with the law, but says, "As doctors, we're supposed to protect life and health; we're supposed to advocate for our patients. I will carry on in whatever way I can that I believe to be the most effective in getting the government to change its climate-harming policies."

She also believes the General Medical Council (GMC) needs to rethink its rulebook when it comes to cases involving climate change. "Times

have changed—we are facing an [existential threat](#) to humanity," she says. "I'm not asking to be let off or for the decision to be reversed, but I think the GMC needs to wake up and explore why this has happened. And how they should maybe change things for the next doctor in my position who comes before them."

She is not alone. Doctors organizations, including the British Medical Association and The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, remain concerned that her case could set a precedent for other doctors who peacefully protest.

The GMC is clear, however, that the tribunal's decision had nothing to do with [climate change](#) but because Benn broke the law.

Waters describes how over the past 20 years, Benn and her husband have made a series of lifestyle changes to reduce their [carbon emissions](#): they both eat a vegan diet; they've insulated their home; they don't buy new; they don't fly.

Then in April 2019, when Extinction Rebellion appealed for everyone to take to the streets for an International Rebellion [protest](#), she and her family went to find out more, talk to protestors and sit in on its citizen assemblies. From there she joined a local group and began taking direct action soon after.

But in terms of success, Benn says, "Nothing has changed, emissions are still going up, the temperature is still going up." Net Zero is "magical thinking."

She forecasts that it will take a sequence of extreme weather events coupled with [food shortages](#) for the government to finally take notice, and she is in no doubt that society would expect doctors to lead the way on this issue. "The [climate crisis](#) is a health crisis, it's a threat to life, and

we should be taking a leadership role," she says.

"We should be leading and showing others how you can lead a life that reduces your own impact on the planet. But also we should use our voices as professionals to speak out about the government inaction and the jeopardy that this is imposing on future generations. We understand the science and we can't ignore that. It is our moral duty," she argues.

More information: Feature: "I'm not asking to be let off"—suspended climate activist GP Sarah Benn continues to stand her ground, *The BMJ* (2024). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.q1003](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.q1003)

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