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CLIMATE EMERGENCY

“I’m not asking to be let off”—suspended climate activist GP Sarah Benn continues to stand her ground

Sarah Benn—the first doctor to face disciplinary action after being convicted and jailed for actions relating to climate activism—tells **Adele Waters** why suspension from the medical register will not stop her protesting

Adele Waters *freelance journalist*

“I don’t feel guilty. I don’t feel I’ve dishonoured the profession, and I think I could explain myself very well to anybody who thought that I had,” says Sarah Benn, climate activist and former general practitioner.

Fresh from the decision by the UK’s Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service (MPTS) on 23 April to suspend her from the professional register for five months,¹ she finds the situation clear: the activism that led to her suspension was necessary to raise the alarm over the climate crisis and was 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 says. “All the science is absolutely shocking—the planet is on a path to 2°C warming (above pre-industrial levels), if not more. We need to do something really radical and urgent to protect our coral reefs and Arctic sea ice and to stop deadly heat waves, but that’s not happening. The inaction is just shocking.”

From peaceful protest to suspension via jail

Benn, from Harborne in Birmingham, UK, doesn’t sound angry or defiant as she speaks. She is more in the mould of a serious teacher, calmly explaining a logical sequence of events that must be followed.

So how did she end up being suspended from the register? Two years ago she engaged in a series of peaceful protests aimed at stopping the government granting new oil licences. She stood holding a protest placard outside the Kingsbury Oil Terminal in Warwickshire in breach of an injunction, granted in April 2022, 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 emphasised that professional rules do not prevent doctors from engaging in peaceful protests but do require them to comply with the law. It was the multiple breaches of a court order resulting in a custodial sentence that prompted professional regulator the General Medical Council (GMC) to refer Benn to the MPTS.

The tribunal suspended her from the register for five months, after which there will be a review hearing, at which Benn could be struck off. The GMC is considering another case against her over a magistrates’ court conviction, and she faces an upcoming jury trial with three charges against her.

Benn is resigned to the risk that more protests will bring further brushes with the law. “I will certainly be out again, doing stuff that may break the law [and] may end me up in prison again. That’s not the intention, but I can’t just say, ‘The government’s got this.’”

“As doctors, we’re supposed to protect life and health; we’re supposed to advocate for patients,” she says. “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.”

“The GMC needs to wake up”

At the tribunal, Benn argued that, as a doctor, she had a moral duty to take action to protect life and health and, given that she knew the evidence about climate change, if she chose to stay quiet, she would be failing in her obligations and breaching the requirements of the GMC’s *Good Medical Practice*. Having retired from clinical work in April 2022 and then relinquishing her licence to practise later that year, she was keen to stay on the medical register because being a doctor was a “core part of her identity.”

In bringing the case against her, the GMC argued that Benn’s fitness to practise had been impaired in two ways: she had not acted within the law; and her conduct failed to justify patients’ trust in the profession. The tribunal concluded that Benn’s conduct fell short of the standards of conduct that should be reasonably expected of a doctor, which amounted to misconduct.

Although the MPTS operates separately to the GMC, it is accountable to it and follows its fitness to practise rules. Benn thinks that the 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’ organisations, including the BMA and the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, a coalition of UK based health organisations, remain concerned that her case could set a precedent for other doctors who peacefully protest. The GMC has made clear, however, that the tribunal’s decision was nothing to do with climate change but because Benn broke the law. “Our fitness to practise investigations consider cases that are referred to us and where doctors have broken the law, not their motivations for doing so.”

Her “biggest climate crime”

Benn’s conversion to the environmental cause has been gradual. Over the past 20 years she 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.

Technically, her three children have been her “greatest climate crime,” she says, but they are her exception—she feels guilt but no regret. “The guilt is for the impact on the Earth, but also on them—for bringing them into a world that is not the place I thought it was, and where the future may be very bleak. The impossibility of regret, however, is one most parents will understand: I love them deeply and cannot imagine my life without having experienced the joy of their presence in it.”

Aside from her short prison spell, everything else about Benn is unassuming, very much non-radical: professional, married with kids. She doesn’t like to make a fuss and isn’t one to complain in restaurants. “I was very much a ‘goody two shoes’ at school. At the end of my first year at secondary school, I was terrified when I got summoned to the headmistress’s office at break time. When I got there, it was to be congratulated on my exam grades. From then on, it happened quite regularly.”

The only sign of a future rebellious streak came at age 15, when the cancellation of the school talent show pricked her sense of injustice, and she went to complain to the headmistress. She has been reluctant to make a stand ever since. Until five years ago.

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. “I discovered an amazing bunch of people and a huge spectrum of different backgrounds and backstories and such a wealth of different ideas, perspectives, energy. They are good, decent people, not a load of, what we sometimes get categorised as, eco zealots, bunny huggers, or tree huggers.”

“Net zero is magical thinking”

Benn seems somewhat burdened by the scale of the challenge of campaigning for the government to do more to reverse climate breakdown before it’s too late. So how would she rate the success of Extinction Rebellion, and the group she is closely aligned with, Doctors for Extinction Rebellion?

“Nothing has changed, emissions are still going up, the temperature is still going up,” she says. “But social movements take years to achieve change, and we’re on a journey. The first thing that needs to happen for proper change is for everyone to understand the dire situation we’re in. Extinction Rebellion’s first demand of the government is to tell the truth. And that still hasn’t happened

because the government is still saying: ‘We’ve got Net Zero 2050, we’re on track.’ But we’re not. It’s all 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. “Sadly, at that point, people may be shocked and alarmed enough to open up to the truth of it, to look at what’s happening and to really look at the science.”

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.”

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- 1 Dyer C. Former GP is suspended for five months over protests to end fossil fuel extraction. *BMJ* 2024;385. doi: 10.1136/bmj.q940 pmid: 38658039