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Climate activists should be applauded as advocates for public health (Letter)

YASSAIE, Rammina <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6756-8678>

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Climate activists should be applauded as advocates for public health

Smith is right to acknowledge the admiration that many of us hold for those who make huge personal (and in Patrick Hart's case, professional) sacrifices by acting in line with their conscience.(1)

But we must avoid framing climate activists as merely acting on "their beliefs." Hart and others who have been imprisoned for engaging in non-violent climate action are not acting based on beliefs or personal opinions, but rather in the name of decades of well established climate science that evidences the need for urgent action.(2) The narrative that such actions are based on personal convictions and opinions has been exploited by the General Medical Council as part of its justification for suspending doctors who have been imprisoned for climate related offences.(3)

Smith also expresses scepticism about the effectiveness of civil disobedience, but research has shown that it leads to greater support for more moderate climate organisations.(4) Moreover, even in health circles, the Overton window (the range of actions that can be recommended without seeming too extreme) is widening as a result. Examples include the British Medical Association voting to protect doctors from sanctions from activism (5) and the Allied Health Professional's curriculum for sustainable healthcare discussing the role of "climate action and political agency" and specifically naming Extinction Rebellion as having been effective in this space.(6) We are, therefore, already seeing the shift in what may have once been deemed as radical becoming normalised as core business for health professionals.

It may be true, however, that not all health professionals will be able to engage in civil disobedience, as there is an air of privilege associated with being able to partake in such actions. Some health professionals, namely those from ethnic minorities, are already unfairly penalised by both the criminal justice system(7) and the medical regulator,8 so expecting these people to take part when they will face greater consequences than their white counterparts may be unjust.

Health institutions including royal colleges, regulators, and employing organisations ought to use their own privilege and power to proudly, publicly, and courageously applaud climate activists, such as Hart, as the true advocates for public health. They must also vociferously challenge the GMC's suspension of those who care so deeply about patient health that they are willing to pay such a heavy price for all our sakes.

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