

# Climate action: no time to waste

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Accepted for publication: 20.1.2020

Modern societies are transforming the planet on which human life depends – and for the worse. BSDJ readers have a key part to play in climate action, both as citizens and as members of the medical profession. In thinking about these dual roles, it is important to remember today’s children and those yet to be born lack direct representation in the decisions that will determine their future: in elections, in the structures of local and national government and in policy-making. In all these key public domains, they rely on adults to speak up on their behalf.

## Climate change matters to everyone

In the 19th century, the harnessing of fossil fuels drove the industrial revolution in the UK, Europe and North America. In the 20th and 21st century, the development of the global economy has similarly been powered by fossil fuels. The burning of coal, gas and oil produces carbon emissions which increase atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and, in consequence, global temperatures. All three – carbon emissions, atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> and global temperatures – have reached record levels and are continuing to rise. These climatic changes have been combined with other human-induced changes of the planet, including to its oceans, forests and cryosphere (the frozen polar regions, glaciers and mountain icecaps).

Climate change can no longer be dismissed as ‘not real’. It is happening fast and having increasing human impacts, particularly on communities – like the small island states – who have contributed least to it. Climate change has many faces, including the spread of climate-related infectious diseases and extreme weather events like droughts, wildfires, storms and floods. In the UK, climate change is making its presence felt through the increasing frequency and ferocity of flooding, an experience taking a heavy toll on people’s wellbeing and their sense of security in the world around them.

Time to address what is rightly called the climate emergency is very short. Mean global surface temperature has risen by 1° Celsius above the pre-industrial period, with most of the increase occurring in the last forty years. An increase above 1.5°C would take the human population to a place where people’s health and livelihoods are under increasing threat and where we risk bequeathing to today’s children a climate system beyond their control. To avoid such a future, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions need to be reduced by half by 2030 – by the time a child born today reaches their 10th birthday. Emissions need to reach net zero by 2050 – by the time that child could expect to have children of their own.

## Climate change matters to the medical profession

Safeguarding human health is at the heart of medicine. General Medical Council (GMC) guidance on Good Medical Practice spells out the doctor’s fundamental duty to ‘protect and promote the health of patients and the public’. The same duty underpins Faculty of Public Health (FPH) guidance for those seeking a career in public health. As people’s anxieties about climate change increase, the GMC guidance on ‘listening and responding to patient concerns’ and the FPH’s requirement that ‘you must respond, when and where you are able, in emergencies’ take on new and deeper meanings. Doctors for Extinction Rebellion (1) and the climate-focused work of Medact (2) are two examples – among many – of how members of the medical profession are responding to this call. In support, the BMA and the Royal College of Physicians have issued declarations of a climate emergency.

There are further reasons to support the medical profession’s engagement in climate

action. The first is the large carbon footprint of the healthcare sector, a footprint which itself adversely affects people's health. A recent report estimates that the global healthcare sector is responsible for 4.4% of global net emissions and concludes 'if the health sector were a country, it would be the fifth-largest emitter on the planet' (3). The report lays out actions to enable the sector to achieve net zero emissions before or by 2050, a goal integral to Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), the international NGO which co-authored the report. HCWH supports the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals Network (4) that provides local entry-points for healthcare workers (for example, via UK hospitals and NHS Trusts) to be part of the climate movement.

Secondly, the medical profession is a trusted authority. Along with nurses and pharmacists, doctors are consistently rated highest for their honesty and ethical standards. In contrast, recent decades have seen declining public trust in governments and politicians and, in the UK, a widespread perception that neither the government nor the media present official statistics honestly. In this context, the medical profession are among the few trusted 'truth speakers'. As part of their duty to protect everyone's health, they have become active partners in public debates about climate change, for example via the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change (5).

2020 is widely regarded as crunch time for effective climate action. In November, the countries signed up to delivering the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change will be meeting in Glasgow (6) to review their ambitions to reduce their carbon emissions by 2030. Strengthening these ambitions – by a factor of five – is required to keep the global temperature rise below 1.5°C. Public engagement is absolutely essential to build and sustain pressure on governments to act now and act decisively to keep their populations safe. As citizens and as health professionals, BSDJ readers have a vital role to play.

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Journal DOI

[10.18573/issn.2514-3174](https://doi.org/10.18573/issn.2514-3174)

Issue DOI

[10.18573/bsdj.v4i1](https://doi.org/10.18573/bsdj.v4i1)

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