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Environmental activism

Britain: Doctors condemn suspension of retired GP over UK climate protests

Wednesday 24 April 2024, by [LAVILLE Sandra](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2024).

British Medical Association says decision to take Dr Sarah Benn off medical register for five months 'sends worrying message'

Doctors groups are calling for urgent consideration of the rules for medical professionals who take peaceful direct action on the climate crisis, which they say is the "greatest threat to global health", after a GP was suspended from the register for non-violent protest.

Dr Sarah Benn, a GP from Birmingham, [was taken off the medical register for five months on Tuesday](#) by the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service (MPTS), the disciplinary arm of the General Medical Council (GMC), over her climate protests.

The tribunal said Benn's fitness to practise as a doctor had been impaired by reason of misconduct. Benn, who is retired, has taken part in a number of peaceful protests since 2019.

Benn received conditional discharges after being convicted for taking part in peaceful protests, including two offences of obstructing a highway. In 2022 she was jailed for 32 days for breaching a civil injunction at Kingsbury oil terminal as part of a Just Stop Oil campaign.

Doctors groups were united in condemning the suspension from the medical register. The Doctors' Association said: "Not all doctors subject to a custodial sentence having broken the law have been sanctioned by the MPTS. The MPTS can use its discretion."

The suspension of Benn showed that the GMC would impose sanctions on doctors for raising serious concerns about the risk to public health from the greatest threat to global health the world had seen, the association said.

"Climate change, its effect on the planet, weather patterns, future health and even the survival of the human race is evidence-based," it added.

"The profession has not been undermined by her actions, and the public is not concerned about one doctor trying to protect them and the planet but more by the inadequate response of the government and organisations, including the GMC, to our overwhelming and unprecedented climate crisis."

The British Medical Association (BMA) said many people would find it very difficult to understand that a doctor's ability to practise medicine could be suspended because of peaceful actions they take in protest of the climate crisis.

It called for urgent consideration of the rules, which it said meant a doctor was suspended for a

punishment they had already received for taking part in a legitimately peaceful protest.

"This ruling sends a worrying message to other doctors about the regulation of matters not directly related to patient care or their clinical skills, and raises serious questions about the rules behind the handling of such cases," the BMA said.

"The climate crisis is also a health crisis and as such doctors are understandably concerned."

Benn's case will be reviewed before the five-month suspension ends, when she could be struck off. In her submission to the tribunal, Benn included a statement by the UN special rapporteur on environmental defenders, Michel Forst, who [earlier this year condemned](#) the UK's crackdown on environmental protest.

In his most recent statement Forst said the professional tribunals of medical doctors taking part in peaceful direct action suggested the situation in the UK was deteriorating. "It is important for me to stress that professional sanctions can definitely be considered as a form of penalisation, persecution or harassment," he said.

Benn told the tribunal that as a doctor she had a "moral duty to take action".

She said: "The climate emergency is a health emergency; not a potential future one, but here and now. If I know all this and I choose to stay quiet, I am failing in my obligations. I am breaching the guidance in good medical practice to make my patients' health my first concern."

But the tribunal found the "overwhelming majority of the public would not condone breaking the law in the repeated way in which Dr Benn did, especially given the impact, on the final occasion, to the wider public resources involved".

Benn was [the first of three](#) GPs facing disciplinary action by the GMC for peaceful protest on the climate crisis.

In a letter to the GMC this week, the UK [Health](#) Alliance on Climate Change, which includes the royal colleges of medicine and medical journals, said there was widespread dismay among doctors at Benn's suspension from the medical register for Just Stop Oil protests.

"Doctors cannot understand how a doctor can be punished for taking action to mitigate the damage to nature and climate, the major threat to global health," the letter states.

"There is also dismay that Dr Benn is among the first doctors to appear before a tribunal after protesting and that the finding will set a precedent for other doctors who will be following. Many in the GMC must recognise that they are finding themselves on the wrong side of history."

A GMC spokesperson said: 'Dr Sarah Benn was referred to a hearing at the MPTS not for protesting about climate change, but for multiple breaches of a court order which resulted in a custodial sentence. Like all citizens, doctors have the right to express their personal opinions on issues, including climate change. There is nothing in our guidance to prevent them from doing so, nor from exercising their right to lobby government and to campaign, including taking part in protests.

"However, patients and the public rightly have a high degree of trust in doctors and that trust can be eroded if doctors repeatedly fail to comply with the law. Our fitness to practise investigations consider cases which are referred to us and where doctors have broken the law, not their motivations for doing so. It is not the role of regulators to determine UK law – that is a matter for parliament."

Sandra Laville

P.S.

- The Guardian. Wed 24 Apr 2024 15.16 CEST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/apr/24/doctors-condemns-suspension-retired-gp-uk-climate-protest-british-medical-association>

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