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Schoolchildren's activism is a lesson for health professionals

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Like them, we must campaign relentlessly for carbon net zero by 2030

In March, hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren in 2000 cities from 123 countries left school to call for action on climate change. They inspired millions more, including the non-violent direct activists participating in the Extinction Rebellion protests, and **set an example for those of us who are older (and possibly less wise)**. Now the Friday strikes happen in many countries every week (#FridaysForFuture).

It is young people who will be most affected by the floods, desertification, fires, hunger, disease, mass

migration, and wars caused by climate change. These disastrous consequences have already begun and will grow rapidly worse without urgent action, which must include the abandonment of fossil fuels. Health professionals and their organisations must support and learn from the schoolchildren's action, finding more effective ways to help people and politicians understand that climate change is by far the biggest threat human health has ever faced.

The story of the student protests is a good example of cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead's well known quote: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." The movement began with Greta Thunberg, a 16 year old Swedish student who in August 2018 started to miss school every Friday and protest about inaction on climate change outside the Swedish parliament.

For weeks she protested alone, but slowly and exponentially others followed her example. Since then, Thunberg has spoken at the World Economic Forum and attended the United Nations meeting on climate change. She has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and has 400 000 followers on Twitter. During her Easter holidays she travelled to London, where she spoke to politicians from all parties and joined the Extinction Rebellion protests.

Thunberg has Asperger's syndrome, which she calls "a gift." She speaks bluntly: "Why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more, when no one is doing anything to save that future? ... We must change almost everything in our current societies ... Adults keep saying: 'We owe it to the young people to give them hope.' But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic ... If you have a child that is standing in the middle of the road, and cars are coming at full speed, you don't look away because it is too hard to see, you run out and get that child away from there."¹

The schoolchildren's action follows last year's warning by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that raising the global temperature by more than 1.5°C could make the world uninhabitable—and yet we are heading towards a 3°C increase.² Keeping below 1.5°C of warming requires "rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society," says the report.² Globally, we must conserve energy, generate renewable energy, prioritise walking, cycling, and public transport, produce food with a much smaller carbon footprint, promote a largely vegetarian diet, introduce an escalating carbon tax, and care for agricultural land and wild areas so that they maintain biodiversity and become important carbon sinks. Such developments will protect human health in the future and bring substantial benefits now.

Yet despite the increasingly ominous warnings of the past 30 years no country in the world has acted on the scale needed. We carry on arguing about Brexit, prioritise curing disease rather than preventing it, plan new airports, be creative, go to work, and bring up our children as if nothing was happening.

Delusional thinking

We enjoy what David Wallace-Wells calls "an anthology of comforting delusions: that global warming is an Arctic saga, unfolding remotely; that it is strictly a matter of sea level and coastlines, not an enveloping crisis sparing no place and leaving no life undeformed; that it is a crisis of the "natural" world, not the human one; that those two are distinct, and that we live today somehow outside or beyond or at the very least defended against nature, not inescapably within and literally overwhelmed by it."³ He lists other delusions in his book

The Uninhabitable Earth: A Story of the Future Life, but the greatest may be that technology alone can save us.

With their relentless protests, Thunberg and other schoolchildren around the world have shown a commitment that other groups, including health professionals, have not managed. Despite the efforts of, for example, the Global Climate and Health Alliance (climateandhealthalliance.org), the Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change (lancetcountdown.org), and the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change (ukhealthalliance.org), the commitment of health professionals to this issue has been patchy, intermittent, and sotto voce.

Climate breakdown is an immediate health threat not a distant environmental inconvenience. Now is the time for health professionals to share the demands of schoolchildren and Extinction Rebellion activists, to insist that all governments tell the truth about climate change, declare an ecological and climate change emergency, and act urgently to halt biodiversity loss and to reduce greenhouse gasses to carbon net zero by or before 2030.

To facilitate this, we call on governments to create and be led by citizens assemblies on climate change and ecological justice, and on health professionals to vote only for representatives who prioritise climate change.

Footnotes

- Competing interests: We have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare the following interests: RSt and FG are executive members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change. All authors are supporters of the schoolchildren's action (#FridaysforFuture) and Extinction Rebellion.

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