

# LAWYERS ARE RESPONSIBLE

## Lawyers Are Responsible Statement in Support of Dr Sarah Benn

Wednesday 24 April 2024

Lawyers are Responsible supports people exercising their right to peaceful protest, especially protest to raise awareness of the climate and ecological emergency. Climate and ecological breakdown is undermining the rule of law, peace and everything we love. Recently the European Court of Human Rights [found](#) that climate inaction breached the right to private life and in principle, the right to life due to the effects of climate breakdown on human health. The evidence of the cataclysmic seriousness of the climate and ecological emergency is clear and virtually undisputed among the scientific community.

We are therefore in support of Dr Sarah Benn, a GP of 32 years' service who was recently found guilty of misconduct in a Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service case. Dr Benn's 'misconduct' was her ongoing peaceful campaigning, which led to a short prison sentence after she held a placard reading 'Stop New Oil' outside an oil depot, in breach of an injunction. Dr Benn acted on an ethical imperative, in line with General Medical Council (GMC) guidance that doctors 'take prompt action' if they think patient safety 'is or may be seriously compromised.' If our own government acted on the science, concerned citizens like Dr Benn would not be compelled to take civil disobedience to raise the alarm. Unbelievably, our government continues to expand fossil fuel extraction. Our government's actions are extremely dangerous and reckless. As UN Secretary General [António Guterres said in a speech](#) in April 2022: "Climate activists are sometimes depicted as dangerous radicals. But, the truly dangerous radicals are the countries that are increasing the production of fossil fuels."

We believe Dr Benn's actions to be commendable, we think that the majority of people who are properly informed about climate and ecological breakdown would agree. We do not see the justice in punishing Dr Benn, especially in circumstances where the continued inaction of governments and corporations has led to extreme suffering and mass loss of life. We are also concerned about the increasingly repressive environment for climate defenders and note that professional sanctions contribute to this climate of repression. At least two other doctors in addition to Dr Benn face tribunals with the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service later this year. This situation has come to the attention of Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on environmental defenders. [Mr Forst has stated](#) "I had not seen a situation as concerning as the one in the UK." He has also made clear "professional sanctions can definitely be considered as a form of "penalization, persecution or harassment." We agree. Our justice system, including the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service, is brought into disrepute when their judgments are so

concerning as to attract criticism of UN Special Rapporteurs. Mr Forst further stressed that “Protests are not a threat to democracy. They are a sign of its healthy functioning.”

Instead of punishing principled professionals who raise the alarm, we urge the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service to reconsider its position in future climate activism cases, and not to remove the licences of doctors who take peaceful climate action. We also urge institutions like the GMC to advocate for the transformational climate action needed to mitigate mass loss of life, and to join in with other health organisations already doing so.

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