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Hope can bring solutions to climate despair

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Can we find hope in a hopeless place? Earth 2022 can certainly feel hopeless, given our greater awareness of climate related health emergencies, such as floods in Pakistan and famine in Somalia (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2407, doi:10.1136/bmj.o2413).^{1,2} The effects of climate change on vulnerable populations—disabled people and migrants, for example—are easily ignored (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2387, doi:10.1136/bmj.o2389).^{3,4} Yet hopelessness, though understandable, can lead to climate despair. Hope, however abstract it may seem, helps “protect wellbeing and foster activism in the face of adversity” (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2411).⁵

One advantage of hope is that it can also lead to solutions. As populations continue to be failed by governments and industry, and as this year’s climate change conference (COP27) struggles for global attention on the climate emergency (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2391),⁶ the need to focus on and prioritise solutions is urgent and imperative. This is do or die on a grand scale. The apocalypse is now.

Instead of reacting with the speed and commitment required, people in power are enriching energy companies and allowing fossil fuel extraction at unsustainable levels (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2414),⁷ abandoning climate friendly policies on the pretext of the cost-of-living crisis (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2377),⁸ and tolerating false narratives about the climate crisis that intimidate supporters of progressive climate policies into becoming a silent majority (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2376).⁹

We are tolerating this, but our children don’t want to be next. Children are among the groups most vulnerable to climate change, with long term consequences on health and wellbeing (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2425).¹⁰ Adolescents (10-24 year olds), a quarter of the world’s population, are taking matters into their own hands. Despite the odds, despite being the group most affected by the impending climate disaster, they are increasingly turning to activism and pioneering a human rights based approach to climate change (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2401).¹¹

They are not alone. The impact of climate change on health and wellbeing places a moral duty on clinicians to lead society with advocacy and solutions. Many are rising to the challenge (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2400).¹² Two specific examples, with approaches to be followed in a clinical setting, are efforts to reduce the health effects of ambient air pollution (doi:10.1136/bmj-2021-069487) and to achieve net zero in anaesthesia (doi:10.1136/bmj-2021-069030).^{13,14} Another, the route to achieving a net zero carbon transport system, can be achieved with a shift away from private cars (doi:10.1136/bmj-2021-069688).¹⁵

Many of the solutions needed may be radical, but we must embrace them to pull us back from the despair of the destiny currently painted for future generations. Health professionals have always prioritised the health and wellbeing of their patients and populations. That responsibility now extends to the health and wellbeing of the planet, since planet and people are inextricably linked. Societies, governments, and corporations must now also champion these priorities, make them central to their manifestos and strategies, and understand that prosperity and happiness will follow (doi:10.1136/bmj.o2246).¹⁶ The future belongs to young people, but they cannot reach it alone.

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