



Irish Doctors
for the **Environment**

Fuel Health, Not Harm: An Open Letter from Healthcare Workers

The climate crisis is the greatest threat to global health of the 21st century [1]. In November 2024, the *Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change reported on the deep and far-reaching implications of the climate crisis for our health, from escalating heat-related mortality to increasingly extreme and frequent weather events, changing patterns of infection, and food and water insecurity [2].

In addition, The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that 99% of the world's population lives in areas where air quality exceeds safe limits and that annually there are 6.7 million premature deaths from air pollution alone [3,4]. Earlier this year, Doctors for the Environment Australia produced a comprehensive and damning report on the health hazards of fossil fuels, highlighting air pollution as a significant risk factor for cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, multiple cancers, poorer antenatal outcomes and behavioural problems in children [5].

Fossil fuels are irrefutably the main driver of the climate-health crisis: burning of coal, oil and gas is the primary source of air pollution and is responsible for over 75% of greenhouse gas emissions [5,6].

Despite this knowledge, a record-breaking 57 gigatons of greenhouse gases were released into the atmosphere last year [7]. 2023 was the hottest year ever recorded, and 2024 is predicted to be even hotter [8]. It couldn't be clearer: we are failing in every sense of the word.

Shockingly, while the planet boiled in 2023 the top 5 fossil fuel companies saw a profit of just shy of 110 billion US dollars [9].

The plastic crisis is the other face of our civilisation's fossil fuel addiction. Most plastics are made from crude oil, natural gas and coal [10]. The chemicals and additives contained in plastics are known to cause hormonal imbalances, reproductive disorders, infertility and to increase the risk of certain cancers [11]. They also increase the risk of cardiovascular disease by causing hypertension, obesity and diabetes [11,12]. Children are particularly at risk as exposure during foetal development is linked to neurobehavioral and neurodevelopmental disorders [11]. The plastic crisis is a health crisis in itself.

Fossil fuel companies spend billions of euros annually on advertising and sponsorship, not only to increase profit and buy social capital, but to establish, solidify and normalise their place in our society. By prohibiting these companies' access to our billboards, newspapers, TV, radio and social media channels we are taking the first step towards instigating the necessary shift in social and political attitudes and weaning ourselves off our fossil fuel addiction.

As healthcare professionals, we are compelled to act when health is threatened. Just as we once did with smoking, we are now calling on the government to ban fossil fuel advertising and sponsorship.

Let's fuel health instead.

Signatories

1. Dr Marica Cassarino, Academic in Psychology,
2. Ruth Morrissey, Advanced Nurse Practitioner 144843
3. Dylan Foley, Anaesthesia SHO 516209
4. Dr Viktoria Hennessy, Anaesthesia SHO 432035
5. Dr Anna-Katharina Duerr, Anaesthesia SHO 531162
6. Dr Matthew Brohan, Anaesthesia SHO 516052
7. Dr Eanna Mulvihill, Anaesthesia spr 431043
8. Dr Darren McMahon, Anaesthesia SpR 420194
9. Dr Ola Løkken Nordrum, Anaesthesiology SpR IMC 428146
10. Aidan Fahey, Anaesthetics SHO 515910
11. Antoinette Neylon, Cardiologist 10012635778
12. Dr Grace O'Dea, Cardiology SpR 423478
13. Associate Clinical Professor Breda Lynch, Clinical Microbiology Consultant, IMC 328539
14. Carol Cronin, Clinical Nurse Specialist, NMBI Pin 132475
15. Dr. James Curneen, Clinical Pharmacology & Therapeutics SpR 417237
16. Dr Rosemary Keane, Clinical Psychologist M9062C
17. Theresa Ryan-Enright, Clinical Psychologist
18. Dr Robyn Mulligan, Clinical Psychologist
19. Irene O Byrne-Maguire, Clinical Risk Adviser 029997
20. CORU Dr Sabrina Vassia, Community Medical Doctor IMC 22099
21. Dr Ornaith Cafferty, Community medical doctor 220666
22. Prof Gabrielle Colleran, Consultant Paediatric Radiologist 244475
23. Ronan Desmond, Consultant 23719
24. Dr Roisin Plunkett, Consultant 406358
25. Dr Dónall Ó'Cróinín, Consultant Anaesthesiologist 21504
26. Dr. Brian Murphy, Consultant Anaesthesiologist 406212
27. Vinnie Wall, Consultant Anaesthesiologist 406353
28. Dr Jan Steiner, Consultant Anaesthesiologist 215500
29. Tim Keady, Consultant Anaesthetist 408916
30. Terence Montague, Consultant Anaesthetist 011320
31. Aislinn Sherwin, Consultant Anarsthesiologist 406518
32. Dr Angie Brown, Consultant Cardiologist and Medical Director Irish Heart Foundation 022784
33. Dr Ana Rakovac, Consultant Chemical Pathologist 62368
34. Dr Maeve Lynch, Consultant Dermatologist 221035
35. Conor Woods, Consultant Endocrinologist 225826
36. Éadaoin Ó Catháin, Consultant ENT Surgeon 335091
37. Dr Colm Byrne, Consultant Geriatrician 362775
38. Dr Mary Buckley, Consultant geriatrician 400134
39. Gerard Crotty, Consultant haematologist 11134
40. John O'Donnell, Consultant in Emergency Medicine 14675
41. Anne Doherty, Consultant Liaison Psychiatrist IMC244555
42. Prof Jerome Fennell, Consultant Microbiologist 19990
43. Joanne O Gorman, Consultant Microbiologist 221239
44. Dr Deirbhile Keady, Consultant Microbiologist 17636
45. Mark Little, Consultant Nephrologist 017380
46. Dr Cathy Burke, Consultant Obstetrician / Gynaecologist 19364
47. Professor Nóirín Russell, Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist 023716
48. Dr Jeannette Golden, Consultant Old Age and General Adult Psychiatrist 12979
49. Dr Ana-Louise Hawke, Consultant Paediatrician 244771

50. Dr Caroline Brodie, Consultant Pathologist IMC 23141
51. Dr Sinead Walsh Consultant, Respiratory Physician 221411
52. Stewart McKenna Consultant, in Emergency Medicine 303011
53. Paul Bergin, Critical Care Research Fellow 421325
54. Dr Julia O'Mahony, Dermatology SHO 516277
55. Dr Eimear Duff, Dermatology SpR 420134
56. Dr Rory Barry, Dermatology SpR 423646
57. Karen Fennell, Dietitian DI018388
58. Mary Horan, Dietitian DI007403
59. Fiona O'Shea, Dietitian DI038018
60. Dr Laura Healy, Dietitian DI015196
61. Aveline O'Neill, Dietitian DI058701
62. Derek Cawley, Doctor IMC 220699
63. Eoghan O Coighligh, ED Reg 420657
64. Dr Isabel Waters, ED SHO 515662
65. Jane Fagan, ED SHO 432240
66. Dr. Zahra Naqvi, ED SHO 433851
67. Callum Swift, Em SpR 421700
68. Dr Eduard Turcuman, Emergency Medicine Consultant 410006
69. Darren Carthy, Emergency Medicine Registrar 417379
70. Dr. Chantelle Ní Chróinín, Emergency Medicine Registrar IMC 409188
71. Dr Johnny Collins, Emergency Medicine SHO 515798
72. Dr Robert McGrath, Emergency Medicine SHO IMC 510075
73. Dr Eoin Butler Emergenc, Medicine Specialist Trainee 515693
74. Enda Hession, Emergency Medicine SPR 420264
75. Dr Cale Lawlor, Environmental Public Health Consultant 427293
76. Prof Pat Harrold, Family Doctor 012581
77. Dr Oscar Duffy, Fellow Paediatric Anaesthesiology 409169
78. Dr Aoife O'Sullivan, Gastroenterology SpR 409018
79. Dr Caragh Joy O Regan, Gen med SHO 516804
80. Dr Joseph Buckley Gen Med SHo 516587
81. Dr Eamonn Grennan, General Medicine SHO 515558
82. Bríd McElgunn General, Practitioner
83. Dr Sheila Loughman General, Practitioner 292262
84. Dr Emma Jane McGovern, General Practitioner IMC 411018
85. Catherine Donnelly, General Practitioner IMC 220735
86. Professor Liam Glynn, General Practitioner 19061
87. Dr Peter Shanagher, General Practitioner 425687
88. Dr Thomas Laffan, General Practitioner 363780
89. Dr Yvonne Kelly, general practitioner 220860
90. Emma Harrington, General Practitioner IMC 244748
91. Dr Peter O'Shaughnessy, General Practitioner
92. Dr Ann Spellman, General Practitioner IMC 410888
93. Dr Barry Lunny, General Practitioner 049702
94. Dr Shane Dunlea, General Practitioner 414961
95. Dr Ealga Beary, General practitioner 371155
96. Dr Fiona McLaughlin, General Practitioner IMC 60666
97. Dr Fidelma Savage, General Practitioner 0011421
98. Dr Caroline Hayden, General Practitioner IMC 22486
99. Dr Bridget Kiely, General Practitioner 245435
100. Dr. Sarah Brenbab, General Practitioner 022402
101. Sabrina McHale, General Practitioner 221080
102. Dr David O'Connor, General Practitioner 245311

103. Dr Carroll O'Dolan, General Practitioner 22783
104. Dr SORCHA Dunne, General practitioner 22631
105. Dr Niamh Wheeler, General Practitioner 409215
106. Dr. Kenneth Craig Bishop, General Practitioner (Retired) 000011
107. Dr Kate Rose, General Practitioner and lecturer on planetary health 410744
108. Dr. Abigail O'Brien, General Surgery SHO 504742
109. Grainne O'Malley, Geriatric consultant 221262
110. Emily Killeen, Geriatric Medicine SpR IMC417186
111. Matthew McKenna-Barry, GI SpR 415107
112. Muhammad Ghaznain, GO 409519
113. Dr Fiadhait Carroll, GP 333913
114. Dr Sean Owens, GP 411525
115. Dr Kate Marie Boyle, GP 403111
116. Dr. Aoife Ní Shearcaigh, GP 409183
117. Dr Noelle O'Sullivan, GP IMCN 330580
118. Kieran Harkin, GP MCN 05229
119. Katherine Mansfield, GP 420463
120. Dr Máirtín Ó Maoláin, GP 408980
121. Dr Eleanor Cape, GP 410552
122. Dr Peter Kemple, GP 220871
123. Deirdre Lynch, GP GMC 7029912
124. Patrick Mc Parland, GP 245162
125. Dr Sinead McNamara, GP 125773
126. Dr Declan Breslin, GP 183411
127. Olwyn Devins, GP 23736
128. Sinead Mc Dermott, GP 326371
129. Donal Walsh, GP 245640
130. Dr Aoife Benton, GP IMC220586
131. Matt O' Mahony, GP 221251
132. Dr Robert Scully, GP 412016
133. Dr Declan Murphy, GP (Retired).
134. Ray Ardill, GP Registrar 431906
135. Amy Coughlan, GP registrar 428486
136. Dr. Niamh Kennedy, GP registrar 428164
137. Dr Ailbhe Fell, GP registrar 414378
138. Dr Deirdre Ryan, GP SHO 420361
139. Stewart MacLean, GP trainee 431559
140. Dr Laura Coe, GP trainee 428248
141. Dr Alexander Ross, GP Trainee SHO 516138
142. Professor Debbi Stanistreet, Head of Department of Public Health and Epidemiology BA (Hons) MPH PhD
143. Prof Catherine Darker, Health psychologist M4222
144. Donal O'Farrell, Healthcare Management Consultant and educator
145. Lorraine Jennings, Hospital consultant 220837
146. Dr Johannes B. Letshwiti, Hospital consultant 244986
147. Dr Sara Brabazon, House Officer 97143
148. SORCHA Lennon, HSE
149. Dr. Molly Byrne, Intern 530886
150. Dr Jennifer Cotter, Intern 529458
151. Dr Lilith Walker, Intern 530788
152. SORCHA Commings, Intern 530689
153. SORCHA Feehan, Intern 530880
154. Dr Esmeralda Cecile Pérez, Intern doctor 529916
155. Dr Aoife Dempsey, Intern Doctor 530252

156. Fergus Poynton, Intern NCHD 530502
157. Maca Hourihane, Physiotherapist International Health PT030229
158. Dr. Caoilinn Hughes, Junior doctor 517576
159. Emily Conroy, Junior doctor 516342
160. Elaine Mullan, Lecturer in Public Health & Health Promotion
161. John Paul Murphy, Med reg 425739
162. Doris Braunstein, Med student
163. Dr Darragh Montague, Medical Intern 530828
164. Dr Isabel Gribbin Bourke, Medical Intern 530516
165. Dr Dorcas Oyewande, Medical Intern 529856
166. Niamh Connolly, PhD Medical Lecturer, Health Sciences Researcher
167. Professor Seamus O'Reilly, Medical Oncologist 012605
168. Fiona Cauchi, Medical Scientist MS049166
169. Dr. Una boland, Medical SHO 515598
170. Uisne Feeney, Medical SHO 423291
171. Aisling Walsh, Medical SHO IMC516248
172. Dara Turpin, Medical Student
173. Patrick Henry, Medical Student
174. Jessica Emery, Medical Student
175. Lilian Gleave, Medical Student
176. Ms Rachel Bonner, Medical student
177. Ella Devereux, Medical student
178. Amanpreet Johal, Medical student
179. Andrea Kelly, Medical Student
180. Miss Aisling O'Keeffe, Medical student
181. Rhys David Scully, Medical student
182. Leah Tadros, medical student
183. Mr. Nicholas Wall, Medical Student
184. Emma Phair, Medical Student
185. Arthur Drouaud, Medical student
186. Farah Elnakoury, Medical student
187. Anna Joy O Regan, Medical student
188. Cianna Cregan, Medical Student
189. Aisling Gouldson, Medical Student
190. Sebastian Sorger Brock, Medical Student
191. Aaron O'Sullivan, Medical Student
192. Mr Joshua Osuachalla, Medical Student
193. Alannah Kelly, Medical student
194. Mr Seán O'Connell, Medical Student
195. Ben Maguire, Medical student
196. Ben Olden, Medical student
197. Ellen McLaughlin, Medical student
198. Giacomo Cammoranesi, Medical Student
199. Mr. Michael Jennings, Medical Student
200. Mr Daniel Quinn, Medical Student
201. Diarmuid Hanna, Medical Student
202. Ríal Magan, Medical student
203. Ms Sabina Kelly Falke, Medical Student
204. Mr Logan Martin, Medical Student
205. Mr. Peter Benson, Medical student
206. Sofia Hempelmann Perez, medical student
207. William Phair, Medical student
208. Ms Selma Mortada, Medical student

209. Jennifer Fogarty, Medical student
210. Flora Marcoux, Medical student
211. Ms Sarah McHale, Medical Student
212. Emile Esim-Enoh, Medical student
213. Ms Ava Clarke, Medical student
214. Sean Guinan, Medical student
215. Ailbhe Rooney, Medical student
216. Ruth Duggan, medical student
217. Tavia Walsh, Medical student
218. Brian Flynn, Medical Student
219. Grace Crowley, Medical student
220. Marissa Singh, Medical student
221. Dan Lordan, Medical student
222. Kate Keating, Medical student
223. Fiona Eustace, Medical student
224. Una Maria Ferguson, Medical student
225. Kate McGann, Medical Student
226. Michael smith, Medical student
227. Sion Ormond, Medical Student
228. Emily Barmania, Medical student
229. Grace McLoughlin, Medical Student
230. Aisling Spratt, Medical student
231. Prof Kirsten Schaffer, Microbiologist 24342
232. Dr Sinead Kilgarraf, Microbiology SpR 423565
233. Dr Karl Moloney, NCHD 516326
234. Dr Marion Preston-Marshall, NCHD, Intern 529514
235. Elisabeth Doran, MD Neurology Consultant 401469
236. Dr. Eoghan Donlon, Neurology SpR 417927
237. Gabrielle Humphreys, Nurse 166715
238. Nuala O Connell, Nurse RGN RM RCN
239. Dr Emily Rutherford, Obstetrics and Gynaecology SpR 417696
240. Marion Houston, Occupational therapists CORU OT022710
241. Mr. Edward Loane, Ophthalmic Surgeon 23163
242. Aoife Corcoran, Paediatric SHO 428787
243. Dr. Jonathan Clarke, Paediatric SpR 417298
244. Oisín Ó hAlmhain, Palliative Care Pharmacist PT6164
245. Dr Julie Donnellan, Palliative Care SpR 417229
246. Niamh Dillon, Pharmacist PSI 11807
247. Marcus Kirwan, Pharmacist 11606
248. Ailbhe Hayes, Pharmacist 9873
249. Jane Campbell, Physiotherapist PT030904
250. Dr Orlagh O Shea, Physiotherapist PT032636
251. Edel Cronin, Physiotherapist PT033931
252. Libby Duffy, Physiotherapist PT026707
253. Emma Hughes, Practice Nurse 126403
254. Dr. Odhran McCarthy, Principal Clinical Psychologist PSI
255. Niamh Clarke, PSW Principal social worker 002454
256. Dr Caoimhe Clarke, Psychiatrist 333004
257. Dr Eimear Ní Mhuircheartaigh, Psychiatry Senior Registrar 409281
258. Dr Eoin Galavan, Psychologist M2564C
259. Dr Sinead Mulhern, Psychologist cardiac rehab
260. Anna Comerford, Psychotherapist I.C.P. registrant
261. Brid Kennedy, Psychotherapist M13625; IACP

262. Dr Kellie McConnell, Public Dentist IDC16117
263. Katie Corridan, Public Health Doctor 428807
264. Catherine Conlon, Public health doctor HSE 50149
265. Dr Margaret M. Brennan, Public Health Medicine Specialist Registrar 417169
266. Dr. Sonja Moore, Public Health Senior Medical Officer 420135
267. Dr Richard Daly, Radiation Oncology SHO 515567
268. Ella Schmidt, Radiographer RA50708
269. Lucy Corcoran, RCN 142584
270. Oonagh Peters, Registered Nutritional Therapist & Lifestyle Practitioner Nutritional therapists of Ireland 248
271. Kate O'Shea, Resident medical officer 516323
272. Dr Marie Talty, Respiratory SpR 417690
273. Patrick Davey, Retired Biochemist, in Med Lab Science
274. Dr Elizabeth Cullen, Retired community health doctor 00045
275. Dr Rod Crichton, Retired dentist 112/00
276. Leila Said Gutowski, Retired nurse
277. Mrs Veronica Anderson, Retired Pharmacist MPSI 6468
278. Kate Coghlan, RMI 516346
279. Dr Ger McNamara, Senior Clinical Psychologist N/A
280. Dr Amy Brogan, Senior clinical psychologist PSI M5636
281. Sharon McAllister, RDN Senior Dental Nurse RDN1167
282. Dr. Hugh Denning, Senior House Officer 516041
283. Alice Quinn, Senior Medical Officer 014515
284. Miriam Mooney, Senior Medical Social Worker SW001957
285. Dr Sam Raste, SHO SHO 516031
286. Dr. Jack Doorly, SHO 516252
287. Etain O'Brien, SHO 428566
288. Dr Clodagh Quinn, SHO 516331
289. Éabha Jones SHO, SHO 516280
290. Dr Rachel Cronin, SHO 516255
291. Caoimhe Twomey, SHO 516801
292. Dr Charlotte Meagher, SHO 513967
293. Dr Emily Esmonde, SHO 515987
294. Dr Anna Van Nieuwenhove, SHO 515577
295. Dr. Cian O'Carroll, SHO Imc 516702
296. Eimear Gaffney, Social Work Student 120436656
297. Dr Elizabeth Park, Specialist in Autism and Community Paediatrics 7229049
298. James O'Connell, Specialist Registrar in Public Health Medicine 414566
299. Arnita Ismaili, Staff Nurse RGN
300. Patricia McConnell, Staff Nurse RGN/ RMN
301. James Sweeney, Student
302. Ms Catherine O'Sullivan, Support Worker
303. Dr Siobhán ní Neachtain, Surgical intern 529742
304. Dr Cian Liston, Surgical SHO 516058
305. Susan Gallagher, Traditional Chinese Medicine Practitioner AFPA: 8744
306. Hilary Dolan, Trainee Educational Psychologist
307. Edel McPartland, Vascular Physiologist Svtgbi 520

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