

# Dr Julian Harris

## Coronavirus testing lab 'chaotic and dangerous', scientist claims

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Image caption,

Dr Julian Harris raised concerns about safety protocols in labs

By Sarah Bloch-Budzier

BBC News

**A scientist who processed coronavirus swab samples at one of the UK's largest labs has alleged working practices were "chaotic and dangerous".**

He highlighted overcrowded biosecure workspaces, poor safety protocols and a lack of suitable PPE.

The Health and Safety Executive has uncovered safety breaches at the lighthouse lab in Milton Keynes.

The UK Biocentre, which runs the lab, said strict safety measures were in place and improvements were being made.

## 'Really disturbing'

The joint investigation by the BBC and the Independent has learnt that an experienced virologist who worked at the lab said he was "traumatised" and "freaked out" by seeing inexperienced colleagues unaware of the hazards they were dealing with.

Dr Julian Harris started working in laboratories dealing with highly infectious diseases in the 1980s.

But within one week of working at the Milton Keynes facility - which processes up to 30,000 tests a day - in early July, he was so troubled by what he saw he contacted the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

The "lighthouse labs" are run by independent organisations and are part of the government's plan for increasing testing capacity for coronavirus.

Dr Harris said coronavirus swabs had to be processed in "containment level 2" labs, with tight safety procedures to protect staff.

But he said fellow workers had limited laboratory experience and were not given proper safety induction.

"I found they've got no experience with this sort of facility or handling bio-hazardous, and then they're just launched into this facility," Dr Harris said.

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He saw two people using biosecurity cabinets - enclosed, ventilated workspaces where scientists open the tubes containing the contaminated swabs - which were only calibrated to have protective airflow for one person.

"Once you disrupt that [airflow], you might as well be working on an open bench. It just disrupts the whole reason for a cabinet to protect the operator. And it is really disturbing," Dr Harris said.

He called the working practices "chaotic and dangerous".

The UK Biocentre said that the second scientist was witnessing and supporting the person working in the cabinet, and that new staff had three days of mandatory training.

It also said the lab workers it recruited had previous lab experience.

## 'Gruelling labour'

Dr Harris alleged part of the problem was that recruiters found it tough to bring in experienced staff, because of the drive to push up capacity in time for the winter.

He said the lab set out to recruit young people from the local area to work long shifts, often of 12 hours.

Image caption,

The lighthouse labs were set up as are part of the government's plan for increasing testing capacity

"They just want people to do the gruelling labour of handling these biohazardous things," he claimed.

Dr Harris took his concerns to the laboratory management in early August.

A senior manager told him that the professionally-experienced staff were going back to their institutes - and that the lab was in "a transitional period" and new staff had less experience.

The manager admitted that the training in place did not look "robust enough" for these new recruits.

Dr Harris said he also raised concerns about mobile phones being used in the labs and then taken to the canteen, and a lack of safety signage and first aid kits.

## PPE concerns

The HSE visited the Milton Keynes lab and found five material breaches of health and safety legislation.

The BBC understands they included inadequate health and safety training for staff, and employees working too closely together.

But the Milton Keynes lab said no improvement notice had been issued by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).