

These coronavirus 'carriers' take test samples around London

May 21 2020, by Jill Lawless



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, cycles away after picking up a coronavirus test sample in London. Gee, who says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment, also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

Ben Gee carries the coronavirus all over London.

A bicycle courier, Gee zips from the city's hospitals and clinics with medical samples of the virus, taking them to laboratories for processing.

Gee faces a two-fold fear: exposure to the coronavirus and whether he will have a job after the outbreak. The British government considers medical couriers to be essential workers during the pandemic, but Gee faces being laid off when it is over because the outbreak has hurt the other business of the diagnostics firm he works for.

Thousands of other "gig economy" workers, including ride-hailing service drivers and food couriers, also are torn between safety and sustenance. As Britain's economy stalled when the country went into lockdown on March 23, sending unemployment to a two-decade high, they have scrambled to keep working despite the risks.

"There's a lot of anxiety," Gee said as he paused between deliveries. "Everyone else was going in one direction, staying at home. And I was going in the other direction.

"You just don't know if it's something you're going to catch," he said. "I can't afford to get the virus and be off sick, because if that was the case, I only get the statutory sick pay, which is £94 (\$115) week. So it is very much a case of just having to get up and get in and work, and just hope that I don't catch it."



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, puts on a surgical face mask before entering a medical office to pick up a coronavirus test sample in London. Gee, who says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment, also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

Gee and his colleagues say they haven't been given adequate protection for going into hospitals, clinics and doctors' offices where they collect swab samples to be tested for the highly contagious virus. Their employer gave them gloves, cotton masks and hand gel, but Gee says the supply runs out quickly.

He feels unprotected when he sees the equipment worn by staff at the facilities he visits, including those at a temporary drive-thru test site.

"They had the full visor, the gown, the gloves—very much the full kit," he said. "They're taking samples from doctors and nurses that are driving through. And then once they're finished, they're handing us a big bag of ... suspected COVID samples. And there I am in my thin gloves and my little cotton mask meant to transport this back to our lab. It made me feel very uneasy."

Gee said he is not just concerned about his own health.



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, unchains his bicycle after picking up a coronavirus test sample in London. Gee, who says he fears possible exposure to the virus and

wants better protective equipment, also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

"We're talking about the potential for spreading the virus. We are going into hospitals and clinics. And later on in the day, we're going into cancer hospitals, we're going into fertility clinics, we're going into elderly wards," he added.

He's not being alarmist. While attention has understandably focused on the risks taken by front-line medical workers, more than 100 of whom have died in the U.K. from COVID-19, many other workers also face danger. Britain's Office for National Statistics found that security guards, chefs, cabbies and bus drivers all had higher [coronavirus](#) death rates than [health care workers](#).

The riskiest jobs are often low-paid, insecure and ineligible for a government furlough program that is temporarily paying 80% of the salary of 8 million British employees.

Many gig-economy workers only have welfare payments to fall back on. Claims for Britain's main welfare benefit soared by 69% in April to 2.1 million, the highest level since the 1990s. Construction, hospitality and retail sectors saw some of the biggest falls in job numbers.



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, arrives to pick up a coronavirus test sample in London. Gee, who says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment, also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

While most stores and restaurants remain shut, some food outlets have continued to offer delivery, providing some work—and risk—for drivers like Hanna-Beth Scaife, who works for a fast-food delivery firm in northeast England.

Scaife said she has often delivered to homes where "there would be a notice on the door saying, 'Please step back, leave food at the door. Do

not knock. We have symptoms."

"I don't think when you go and order your takeaway, you realize what kind of a risk your driver is putting themselves at," she said.

Gee and Scaife belong to the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain, which has campaigned for [gig economy](#) workers. In 2016, it won a British court ruling that Uber drivers are employees, rather than independent contractors, and thus entitled to a minimum wage, paid vacation and sick pay. Uber is appealing to the U.K. Supreme Court.



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, leaves after picking up a coronavirus test sample in London. Gee, who says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment, also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is

over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

The union is challenging Gee's employer, The Doctors Laboratory, which said this month it plans to fire 10 of its 140 medical couriers, including Gee. It says the company also failed to provide adequate protective equipment and refused a request by couriers to be tested. The couriers are currently voting on whether to strike.

The Doctors Laboratory said in a statement that "proposed redundancies are not a consideration ever made lightly." But it said "our laboratories have experienced a reduction in activity over the past months, which means there is less demand for the sample transportation our courier fleet delivers."

The firm said its health and safety protocols "are compliant with current regulations" and are kept under review.

"It is inconceivable that we would deliberately expose any of our workforce, of whom our courier fleet is an important part, to undue risk at any time but especially now," it said.



In this May 18, 2020, photo, Medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, walks to deliver a parcel after chaining up his bicycle in London. Gee, who delivers coronavirus test samples, says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment. He also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, poses for photographs after being interviewed by The Associated Press in London. Gee, who delivers coronavirus test samples, says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment. He also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)



In this May 18, 2020, photo, medical courier Ben Gee, who works for The Doctors Laboratory, poses for photographs after being interviewed by The Associated Press in London. Gee, who delivers coronavirus test samples, says he fears possible exposure to the virus and wants better protective equipment. He also worries about whether he will have a job after the outbreak is over because his company has said it will be laying off workers due to a falloff in business. (AP Photo/Matt Dunham)

As Britain slowly eases its lockdown, the streets are starting to fill up again. Gee worries that he soon won't be able to socially distance on his daily commute by train. And he says talks with the company over the layoffs have stalled.

"The clock's ticking down; in two weeks' time, we could be out of

work," he said.

Despite his anxiety, Gee says he feels lucky to have been working during the outbreak. He has enjoyed the "guilty pleasure" of cycling through an eerily empty London.

"With all the chaos going on around us, we had the streets to ourselves," he said.

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