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# Siouxsie Wiles v University of Auckland: 'Victim blaming' HR staff told scientist to stop making public comments on Covid-19

By [Isaac Davison](#)

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High-profile scientist Siouxsie Wiles left a courtroom in tears this afternoon after recounting a threat made against her on Christmas Eve.

Wiles was giving evidence about her struggle to get her employer, the University of Auckland, to protect her against [escalating threats and harassment](#) over her public commentary on Covid-19 and advocacy for vaccination.

Wiles said the university finally started putting safety measures in place at the end of 2021, more than a year after she and colleagues first asked for protection.

But its response was often slow and inadequate, she told the Employment Court this afternoon. She was offered home security by the university after having her personal details published on a far-right social media platform.

There were long delays in getting the security system installed and it did not work properly once installed, she said. When she asked the university for help, she was told the relevant person had gone on Christmas holiday, she told the court.

She felt vulnerable and on Christmas Eve, she received an email from a person who said they had drawn up a list of public figures called "Nuremberg II" and that she had been added to it for "crimes against humanity".

Her voice breaking, Wiles said: "Yet again have tried to engage in good faith the university processes and yet again those processes have failed me and left me unprotected over the holiday period."

Wiles began crying and asked for a break, which was granted by Judge Joanna Holden. Her evidence continues this afternoon.

## 'Victim blaming'

Appearing in court this morning, Wiles said the University of Auckland's HR staff told her to stop making public statements on Covid-19 if she wanted to reduce the threats being made against her.

**Q** The health and safety advice effectively "victim-blamed" her, suggesting she and her colleagues were responsible for the harassment they were getting, Wiles told a court today.

She gave evidence in her Employment Court case this morning, which is being closely watched because of its significance to academic freedom in New Zealand.

The case centres on Wiles' accusation that the university leadership failed to protect her against the "tsunami of threats" she received for her public commentary on Covid-19.

Wiles, a microbiologist and science communicator, said that under her university contract she was dually accountable to two departments, the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences.

One of the core purposes of this dual agreement included external science communications, she said. Despite this, the university had continued to challenge her ability to carry out communication work on Covid-19.

She began speaking publicly on the pandemic in January 2020, and said she felt a moral obligation to communicate the science to the public, make it accessible and combat disinformation that emerged on the coronavirus and later, the vaccines.

"Nothing could have prepared me for the public intensity and media inquiry that came with the Covid pandemic," she said, noting that she was doing up to 30 interviews a day and other commitments. She never let her teaching or research work suffer during this period, she said.

Wiles said she faced "vitriolic" harassment as soon as she began speaking about Covid, with the first abuse starting in March 2020. It eventually escalated to doxing - her personal details and address being posted online - and people coming to her campus workplace to confront staff.

She detailed repeated efforts by herself and colleagues Kate Hannah and Shaun Hendy - who were also being harassed - to get the university to take the threats seriously and put measures in place to protect them.

**P** At one meeting, Wiles said the university's human resources director Andrew Phipps told her to become "less visible" and to pull back from public appearances regarding Covid-19.

"This is victim-blaming and does not recognise the highly gendered way in which me and my female colleagues are targeted when our male colleagues are not," she told the court.

The university "failed at every turn" to show any meaningful support, she said.

Some of her employer's measures proved futile. A dedicated "monitoring email" was set up for her to forward abusive correspondence but it later emerged it was not monitored. She was belatedly told she could raise issues with a police liaison, but her complaint did not immediately lead to any response.

"The situation was becoming almost farcical," she told the court.

## 'Tsunami of threats'

The university denies unjustifiably disadvantaging Wiles or breaching its statutory obligations.

Earlier today, Wiles' lawyers showed a three-minute video to the court to illustrate the extreme threats against the scientist.

It showed a series of clips including one of conspiracy theorists [Billy Te Kahika](#) and Vinnie Eastwood describing her as "Satanic" to their online followers and making inflammatory statements about her in a public meeting.

There was also footage of Te Kahika and Eastwood filming Wiles in a hotel in Wellington, before confronting her over Covid-19 and vaccines. "Make sure you pay ... because you will pay," Te Kahika says in the video.

A recording of a voicemail was played to the court in which an unnamed woman made a disturbing, profane threat against Wiles over her Covid-19 commentary.

"These are not just one-off or random threats, this is an escalating tsunami of threats and harassment," lawyer Catherine Stewart said.

Wiles and her supporters, who were in the public gallery, sat in silence as the video played, some shaking their heads.

In her opening, Stewart said Wiles became a household name for her [commentary on Covid-19](#), and went on to win major awards, including New Zealander of the Year.

Almost immediately after she started speaking out, the threats began, initially about her appearance but becoming increasingly vitriolic and violent, the court heard.

Wiles made her first complaint to the university in April 2020, about three months after her first media comment on Covid.

Stewart said the university failed to act on this complaint and many more. Over the following months, she and her colleagues sent 60 emails about the harassment and threats against her and colleagues, and held seven meetings with human resources staff and managers.

The university did not carry out a threat assessment until June 2022, and that did not include a basic threat assessment, Stewart said. It also took no steps when a conspiracy theorist came onto campus and confronted staff, she said.

During this period, the university used Wiles to promote its success, citing her in annual reports and promotional material as evidence of its academic excellence and critical role during a pandemic.

Yet privately, university leaders were urging Wiles to pull back from her public commentary, the court heard.

"Outwardly, the University of Auckland has clearly enjoyed the prestige of employing such an academic," Stewart said.

"All at the same time while somewhat hypocritically urging her not to engage in public commentary herself.

"She has been subject to ... hostility, singling-out, and sustained ... messages to pull back from her public commentary to the point that she has felt and continues to feel unsafe both mentally and physically."

While she had received some support from colleagues, she had not been backed by people in the "top echelons" of the university, including vice-chancellor Professor Dawn Freshwater and the dean of her department.

"These are the very people who ought to have been supporting her and ought to have had her back during the extraordinary and unprecedented time of a global pandemic."

Wiles and a colleague, physicist and modeller Professor Shaun Hendy, filed complaints against the university in 2021. Hendy resolved his dispute with the university when he left for a new role a year ago.

The hearing is set down for three weeks.

**Isaac Davison is an Auckland-based reporter who covers health issues. He joined the *Herald* in 2008 and has previously covered the environment, politics, and social issues.**

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