

## Connotations of Covid

“You’re looking glum, Mary,” said Ted as he brought in her afternoon cup of tea and biscuit. “Writer’s block again?”

“Yes,” said Mary, with a sigh. “Connotations of Covid. I’ve had enough of Covid – the endless lockdowns, relaxed regulations, different tiers, more lockdowns. It goes on for ever. I want it all to be over, Ted. I want to forget it.”

“I know what you mean,” said Ted. “It’s dreary and can get you down if you let it. But why are you bothering with Covid? Why don’t you write about something cheerful? A bit of escapism to take your mind off things?”

“If only,” said Mary. “But I’ve got this piece to do for my creative writing group. The topic we’ve been set is ‘Connotations of Covid.’ What in any case are *connotations*?”

“A connotation,” replied Ted, “is a feeling or idea *suggested* by some particular word in addition to its literal meaning or *denotation*.”

“Um,” mused Mary. “I think I see what you may be getting at. Covid is CO for ‘corona’, VI for ‘virus’ and D for ‘disease.’ So ‘coronavirus disease’ is Covid’s *denotation*?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Ted.

“But I’m still not altogether clear about ‘connotation,’” said Mary. “I know the verb ‘denote’ well enough. Is there a verb ‘connote’ from which ‘connotation’ derives?”

“There certainly is,” said Ted. “But because these words are not exactly in common use, some people get them confused.”

“Well,” said Mary, dunking her biscuit in her tea, “please unconfuse me.”

“OK,” said Ted, as he sipped his tea. “Take the word ‘home’. It *denotes*, that is *has the denotation*, ‘the place, such as a house or apartment, where a person lives’; but it may also *connote*, that is *have the connotations*, ‘warmth, security, love, happy childhood’.”

“Or,” said Mary, “sadly ‘discord, abuse, coldness, unhappy childhood’ for some.”

“Yes,” agreed Ted, “unfortunately so. But you’ve got the idea.”

“I think so,” said Mary, sipping her tea. “Going back to what I said about lockdowns, relaxed regulations, tightened regulations, different tiers, more lockdowns and so on, we might say that ‘confusion’ is a connotation of Covid.”

“Yes,” said Ted, sipping his tea. “I think we could.”

“And,” said Mary with feeling, “remember last Summer when things seemed to keep changing from week to week? I kept checking on the government website and what was written there was not often clear. Should someone be going back to work if they could or should they work from home and go into work only if absolutely necessary? It kept changing.”

“I know,” said Ted, looking at his empty cup. “Very frustrating it was too.”

“Ah, yes,” said Mary, “frustration – that’s another connotation of Covid. Thanks, Ted. Do you think you can get us both another cup of tea?”

“Certainly,” said Ted, as he collected up their cups and saucers. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Maybe you'll think of another connotation or two while I'm out."

"Maybe I'll do just that," Mary replied.

So Ted went out to the kitchen as Mary sat back, thought again about Covid and began Googling on her laptop. "Let's see, it was about a year ago it began in Britain," she thought, "but wasn't the lockdown late?" She recalled the weeks of dither, and found that during those weeks more 250 000 people attended the Cheltenham Race Festival and 52 000 people crowded into Anfield, including 3000 supporters from Spain where such gatherings had already been banned, to watch Madrid beat Liverpool, leading to Cheltenham and North East England becoming coronavirus hotspots. It wasn't till 23<sup>rd</sup> March that Boris Johnson called the national lockdown.

As Mary was turning these things over, Ted came back in with a fresh cup of tea for each of them and another biscuit for Mary. She turned from her laptop to take her tea and biscuit.

"Here you are, Mary," he said. "Have you had any more thoughts about Covid connotations?"

"Well, yes," said Mary. "I don't know whether to call it dither, hesitancy, tardiness, vacillation or what."

She told Ted what she had been thinking and discovering while he was out of the room.

"I know," said Ted, "and Johnson's continued to dither; it wasn't till 31<sup>st</sup> October that he announced a second national lockdown in England, doing a complete U-turn from a few days before when he had insisted that regional tiers were the right way to go."

"And then," said Mary, "we had all that confusion over Christmas and we're now in the *third* lockdown. It's all been dither, confusion and mixed-messages."

"There you are, then," said Ted, "three more connotations for you: dither, confusion, and mixed-messages."

"Yes," said Mary as she sipped her tea, "though I've got 'confusion' down already. But 'death' must be another connotation. Hasn't our death rate been higher than most countries?"

"Yes, it has," said Ted, "one of the highest in the world – mainly because of the the failures of the infamous £12 billion test and trace programme."

"Oh," exclaimed Mary, "the infamous 'world-beating' one!"

"Yes," said Ted, sourly. "The only world-beating thing has been our death rate! And as for putting Dido Harding in charge of it ..."

He quickly took a sip of tea before his anger got too much.

"Didn't she recently say that no one could have foreseen the coronavirus mutations?" asked Mary.

"She did," said Ted, now calming down a bit. "Yet it's basic school science. It's what viruses do – they mutate. It's appalling ignorance, especially as SAGE were warning about this weeks beforehand."

"How did she get the job?" asked Mary.

"Cronyism," Ted replied. "From PPE to testing kits, this government has outsourced *billions* of pounds worth of contracts to firms connected to the Tory party, many of which lacked relevant experience. So much of the stuff delivered was nowhere near up to scratch and a lot of money has

been wasted.”

“Ah, cronyism,” mused Mary. “Another Covid connotation. But the vaccination programme seems to be going well; I think we’re ahead of most.”

“On the first jabs, it would seem so,” said Ted, finishing his tea. “but it’s being done at the expense of the second jab; and we don’t know how that will work out and what risks the delay involves. France is ahead of us on second doses and so is Denmark. We’ll just have wait and see.”

“Oh,” asked Mary, “but is it true that New Zealand hasn’t even begun vaccinating people?”

“They began on 20<sup>th</sup> February,” said Ted, “but tight border controls has kept New Zealand almost Covid-free. They’ve only had 26 Covid deaths since the pandemic began.”

“We’re tightening border controls, aren’t we?” said Mary.

“Yes, about a year too late!” said Ted. “There were no effective border controls when it mattered. Anyway, I think you’ve got quite a few Covid connotations now.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Mary, looking at the notes she had made. “Let me see: confusion, frustration, dither, mixed-messages, death, cronyism. They’re all a bit negative, Ted. Can’t we think of anything positive?”

“Well, good-neighbourliness,” said Ted. “Think of people who’ve done shopping for us and for other older or infirm neighbours.”

“Yes, you’re right, Ted,” said Mary. “And the heroic dedication of the NHS. Remember how we used to clap for them in the first lockdown?”

“Yes,” said Ted, “I do; and Johnson was only too keen to be shown clapping. It’s a pity his government won’t actually give nurses and care-workers the pay rise they deserve.”

“Yes, it is,” agreed Mary. “But let’s keep with the positives. What about Zoom?”

“Um,” said Ted, “Zoom’s a bit of a mixed blessing, if you ask me. It’s allowed us to have meetings safely and keep in touch. But some days I feel completely Zoomed out. I’m looking forward to the time when we can get out and meet in groups again.”

“So am I,” agreed Mary. “But I’ll add good-neighbourliness, dedication of the NHS and Zoom to my list of connotations.”

“Well, there you are,” said Ted, with a laugh. “You can write a story about My Little Crony who, despite the good-neighbourliness of her chums, is so confused and frustrated at the mixed messages she’s received from the monster, Covidius terribilis, that when the monster zooms into view, she dithers, is overcome by its terrible gaze and, despite the dedicated efforts of the NHS, meets her death.”

“Don’t be silly!” said Mary, as Ted collected up the cups and saucers. “You’ve helped with connotations but I’m not sure you’re really helping my writer’s block much. I think you’d better go and let me get on with it.”

“OK,” said Ted as he went out, “Bonne chance!”