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Viral second wave fear will drive us into another lockdown

Beneath shifting definitions of a second peak is a truth the world is too cowardly to contemplate

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If a second wave is improbable, a second lockdown now looks inevitable. This is the devastating new twist in Britain's dystopian summer blockbuster. The public – dumbstruck with fear behind their face muzzles – have failed to smell the rat, however. This is understandable: second-wave scepticism is controversial; that is until you consider the controversy around shifting “second wave” definitions.

The original concept of a second wave was simple: lifting lockdowns risked an immediate resurgence of the virus. For months we were cudgelled with questionable comparisons to Spanish flu, which first hit in June 1918 and returned to even more deadly effect in the autumn of the same year. Back in the present day, modellers were scanning the world for signs of a Covid comeback as early as spring – with one influential China model projecting a global second wave by mid-summer. And in May, the WHO sounded the foghorn that countries faced an “immediate second peak” if they hastily abandoned lockdown measures.

But with no sign of a second summer wave nor an autumn eruption reminiscent of 1918, the commentariat has amended the definition. Suddenly, a “second wave” meant Covid's seasonal return, in winter, a year on. Widespread adoption of a new phrase in the Covid lexicology – “winter wave” – has academically formalised the idea.

If scientific accuracy is being lost in the Hollywood sweep of The Official Covid Story, perhaps this is because the world can't face the unglamorous truth: rather than exploding in a biblical second coming, Covid may turn out to be a grim, grinding infection that comes back every year. Somehow then we must not only find a way to protect the vulnerable from a seasonal return of Covid; we must inoculate the masses against the seasonal return of panic. If it's a race against time to confront the basic logistics over summer – from testing to PPE – it's also a race against time to confront the basic prognosis: Covid-19 is something we must be willing to live with.

This week, the Health and Social Care Committee seemed blind to this as it cast a pseudo light on the Government's failings. Jeremy Hunt's gentle skewering of Chris Whitty over No 10's abandonment of mass track and trace in March was impressive. But such a narrow line of questioning has only further fed the false narrative that our leadership is defined by ineptitude rather than cowardice. There was a glimmer of hope when Sage member Sir Jeremy Farrar admitted that the virus may be here for “decades”. But as MPs shivered uncomfortably, Sir Jeremy quickly slid back into the warm bath of railing against second wave “complacency”.

But instead of looking us square in the eye, the Tories have chosen Big Brother's panopticon; No 10's new Joint Biosecurity Centre, which will drive "whack-a-mole" local lockdowns, is slickness posing as strategy – and, as it happens, reporting into track-and-trace app failure Dido Harding. When the public twigs that the infection is unlikely to be controlled in this way, the sheer panic could send us back into national lockdown. Three scenarios might help avoid the latter: a vaccine comes along; the Government gets its act together with a plan to protect the vulnerable; or we put in place safety valves against mass hysteria.

Yet to achieve the latter, ditching the concept of a potential second wave in favour of potential seasonal resurgence is just the start. Scientific claims need to be peer reviewed in a more timely and organised fashion. It would help if Sage published all the research papers it considers and all its advice, so these can be peer reviewed in real time. Modellers need to move on from Imperial College's early assumptions and make use of the plethora of evidence-based data now at their disposal – something the [recent "winter wave" paper](#) commissioned by Sir Patrick Vallance failed to do, assuming an infection rate based on early deaths in China.

[Imperial College's research](#) needs to be particularly scrutinised, as its international influence grows. Dr Seth Flaxman - the first author in the paper that notoriously claimed lockdowns may have prevented over 3 million deaths in Europe - this week won fresh funding to model the pandemic across several countries.

Revelations that disrupt the narrative also need to find a stronger voice: within 24 hours, the scandal of [PHE's inflated daily death figures](#) was running out of mileage. This week's London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine modelling on the impact of the pandemic on cancer deaths never gathered steam. So too [a paper by Oxford's Prof Sunetra Gupta](#), which elegantly combined those uneasy epidemiological bedfellows – theory and evidence – to find some parts of the UK may already have reached herd immunity.

Finally, instead of mindless second wave tracking on a 24-hour loop, the broadcast media should put its energies into probing the dishonesty of politicians and assertions of scientists.

And pigs might fly? When the solution is as fantastical as the problem, it ain't exactly a good sign. And so a summer most strange looks set to develop into a thoroughly dark winter's tale.

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