

Riding the crimson wave

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Girls weren't always passing notes across the classroom – sometimes it was pads and tampons.

We grew up knowing a part of our body was taboo – periods were gross and not to be spoken of. If you got your period unexpectedly at school, embarrassment and panic were the immediate responses. *Have I bled through my clothes? What if someone sees?* We've all strategically tied a jumper around our waists to hide leaks, or lent out a pad or tampon to a menstruator in need.

We used to whisper – so the boys couldn't hear – about cramps, clots, headaches, or whether you'd tried to use a tampon yet. We used to cringe at the crinkle of a pad wrapper, mortified if we thought anyone else in the toilet could hear us rip open the packet. Some girls would sit on the side-line, fascinated by a conversation about something they were yet to experience, but could experience any day now.

There was a special PSHE lesson where the boys were sent out of the room and the girls were introduced to their new lifelong friends, the tampon and the pad: *sanitary products* to ensure our *feminine hygiene*.

I never really thought about the connotations of these words until recently, when [a supermarket chain in New Zealand](#) committed to using the word 'period' on its period products, to shift menstruation messaging away from cleanliness, abnormality and taboo. It is the first company in the world to do so, and it feels radical.

It adds to a trend towards period liberation in the UK: earlier this year, the UK launched its [free sanitary product scheme](#), and it was announced [in March](#) that the UK's 'tampon tax' (5% VAT added to the price of period products) will end at the beginning of 2021. Period poverty is finally [given space in the news](#), without squeamishness. The news from New Zealand is another brilliant step forward, and one that I hope the UK will adopt. However, it also begs an important question: *since when was the bar so low?*

Period euphemisms usually take the form of *that time of the month*, *Aunt flo*, *monthly gift*, *the blob* (gross), or my personal favourite, *riding the crimson wave*. In 2016, Clue found over [5000 period euphemisms](#) across the globe, ranging from the German *Erdbeerwoche* (strawberry week), to the Danish *Damedage* (lady days), to the Japanese ぺり一來航 (arrival of Matthew Perry) (not the *Friends* actor).

Simply saying 'I'm on my period' breaks unspoken social etiquette codes. And it can be easier – even more fun – to carry on with our euphemisms: *strawberry week* sounds cute, and I always liked *riding the crimson wave* because it made me feel like a surfer rather than a cramp-ridden, bloated teen. It avoids a moment of potential awkwardness, and everyone knows what you're talking about, anyway; the euphemism is quite innocent.

Regardless, it can feel empowering to openly say, 'I'm on my period, do you have a sanitary towel I can use?' – euphemism free. But 'sanitary' and 'hygiene' – the terms in which period products are typically described – are euphemisms in themselves, and ones that need decoding.

'Sanitary' and 'hygiene' reinforce secrecy because we daren't call a spade a spade – or a period a period. 'Sanitary' implies there's something to clean up. 'Hygiene' implies menstruators need to go an extra step to keep themselves as clean as the rest of humanity. (This is especially ludicrous when you remember the vagina is self-cleaning.)

These hyperclean words teach menstruators to be ashamed of their bodies – even to be disgusted by them. Using 'sanitary' and 'hygiene' isn't a coy way of avoiding saying 'period' – it reinforces damaging misnomers.

Asking for a 'sanitary towel', then, is speaking in the language of the oppressor: it undermines the effort of declaring 'I'm on my period' and reinforces the very taboos we're trying to shatter. Furthermore, calling these products 'feminine' is exclusionary – whether that is to trans men, non-binary people, intersex people, or anyone else who menstruates and doesn't identify with being 'feminine'.

We need to call a period product a period product. It's not 'sanitary' or for 'hygiene', it's to catch the blood that comes out of our vaginas every month. Sometimes it's red, sometimes it's brown, sometimes it clots – but it is always natural, never unhygienic, and never unsanitary.