

## Sawbones 006: Hysteria

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**Justin:** Hey folks, it's Justin McElroy here. Listen, just want to warn you ahead of time, while this week's show will still be free of profanity as you've come to expect from us, we do get into some adult topics.

So if you're listening with the kids you might want to make sure that they're comfortable with that, I guess.

**Sydnee:** [laughing]

**Justin:** I don't know what your relationship is like with your kids.

**Sydnee:** I'd have that whole "birds and the bees" talk with them before listening to them if I were you.

**Justin:** You go ahead and knock that out. Thanks.

**Clint McElroy:** Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose... Your mystery boil?

We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from... That weird growth. You're worth it.

[Intro, *Medicines* by the Taxpayers plays]

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Hey everybody, it's me, your old buddy Justin McElroy. Welcome to Sawbones. It's a marital tour of misguided medicine.

You already know me. I'm Justin tonight, here with you, across the ages. Across the radio waves.

**Sydnee:** Okay. Well, I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Hey you baby. Hey.

**Sydnee:** What's that thing you're doing there, honey?

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Well, you told me that tonight's show was for the ladies. So of course I'm trying to accommodate them.

**Sydnee:** Oh. Okay.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So... I get it. Okay.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] A show for the ladies.

**Sydnee:** Okay. I see what you're going for now. I may have misled you.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Yeah baby. Tell it to me nice and slow.

**Sydnee:** I don't know that the ladies are going to enjoy this.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Oh, history has proven that to be incorrect. The ladies will most certainly enjoy.

**Sydnee:** I'm going to have to ask you to be really careful in this particular episode that you don't offend all the women who listen to our show.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Oh, baby, that seems unlikely. What are we talking about?

**Sydnee:** Okay, I think you're already offending them.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Aw, yeah.

**Sydnee:** But we're—

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Sugar and spice, that's me. You never know what you're going to get. Sugar and spice.

**Sydnee:** Okay. See, it's just getting worse. Just getting worse. The topic I hoped we could discuss was actually suggested to us by our very soon to be sister-in-law, Rachel.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Hey, Rachel.

**Sydnee:** She suggested we talk about hysteria.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Yeah, I'm starting to wonder if my sensual voice was the right call for this topic. This is, of course, for the ladies, so I guess in that regard I was one hundred percent correct.

**Sydnee:** It is for the... Well, could we say women? It's for women?

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] It's for the women.

**Sydnee:** Oh, that was worse. Don't ever say women like that again. Just don't say women, anymore.

**Justin:** [deep, slow, seductive voice] Deal.

**Sydnee:** Just... Yeah.

**Justin:** [transitions back to normal voice] So why, what are we talking about that could be so offensive?

**Sydnee:** So, the concept of hysteria is one that you may not be familiar with now Justin because it doesn't exist anymore.

**Justin:** That's not true. I've heard hysteria. I've heard people mention hysteria before.

**Sydnee:** Well, the word certainly exists, but the idea of it as a malady of women is outdated. It's no longer accepted.

**Justin:** So it was a malady? It was like a sickness?

**Sydnee:** Yeah. So hysteria, the condition hysteria, the illness, dates back honestly to like 1900 B.C. They found Egyptian papyruses... Papyri?

**Justin:** Papers.

**Sydnee:** Papers. That documented a condition where women weren't behaving themselves and they were very upset and they were kind of nervous and they documented a nervous condition at that time that they identified as hysteria.

Of course, they didn't call it that because it's actually a Greek word.

**Justin:** What did they call it, do you know?

**Sydnee:** No. I mean, it wasn't really a term, it was just—

**Justin:** They just had pictures. They would show a hieroglyph.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, of women who were really freaked out.

**Justin:** Just going nuts.

**Sydnee:** And it was already... The reason that they identified it as the condition that the Greeks later called hysteria is that they indicated that a woman's uterus, or womb, as you may colloquially refer to it, was moving around inside their body.

**Justin:** Right. That's... That's bound to happen.

**Sydnee:** No.

**Justin:** No?

**Sydnee:** No. And that's actually where the term hysteria comes from. It's hysteria, or "wandering womb", from the Greek "hystera" for "uterus." So as your uterus migrates around inside your body, it causes you distress.

**Justin:** Now, Sydnee, what causes the womb to start migrating? Does it just get that wanderlust, hear the call of the open road and want to see what's going on with the kidneys? Why does the womb start truckin'?

**Sydnee:** Well, in all honesty Justin, it doesn't. So that's the first thing you need to know. But this idea had persisted, and Plato actually had a theory.

So in 4th and 5th century Greece, Hippocrates upheld this belief. Plato wrote about it in *Timaeus*. And he likened the uterus to a living creature that wandered around the body, largely in response to smells.

**Justin:** Okay, so it's like a bloodhound that you store your babies in.

**Sydnee:** He actually referred to the uterus as "an animal within an animal."

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Cool on several levels Plato. You did it.

**Sydnee:** Not so much. I can't imagine he was popular with the ladies, with that kind of...

**Justin:** But in those days, the society was even more patriarchal than we have now, so maybe they just assumed, "Well, he's named after Play-Doh. He probably knows what's going on."

**Sydnee:** Do you mean, named after Plato the Play-Doh stuff?

**Justin:** Right. [sarcastic] He was named in its honor.

**Sydnee:** Like the dough toy?

**Justin:** I may have taken my persona, as the guy who doesn't know about the thing we're talking about... I may have overstepped. I'm going to walk that back.

**Sydnee:** I think you overshot with that one.

**Justin:** [laughing] I may have overshot. [crosstalk]

**Sydnee:** You know about something, presumably. There are things you know about.

**Justin:** I'm not Mork from Ork. I'm not just learning about this stuff for the first time.

**Sydnee:** [sarcastic] Oh, how I wish you were. Eww. That was weird.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] If you're listening Jesus...

**Sydnee:** So yeah, actually, Plato believed that the uterus moved in response to smells so that in good smells it would move towards them and with bad smells it would move away.

Which was actually a way that you could move the uterus back to its expected position.

**Justin:** Just put some bacon on the tum.

**Sydnee:** Well, if you think... Sure. Actually, if you think it's too high, just put something that smells good down... You know.

**Justin:** What smells good to a womb?

**Sydnee:** I mean, I think that pretty much what they believed smelled good to women. So floral smells?

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Shoe stores.

**Sydnee:** [jokingly disapproving noise] Okay, see. Crossed the line.

**Justin:** Was that good?

**Sydnee:** Crossed the line.

**Justin:** See, I'm really worried about doing episodes about women's stuff because I love... I mean, I'm a very... You know, I'm very progressive, and I like to think I'm very aware of my privilege, I like to think.

I just... Sometimes I'm trying to say stuff that's funny and I just say stuff that's not the right thing to say.

**Sydnee:** I know. You're trying though.

**Justin:** You promise to tell me if I'm offensive, right?

**Sydnee:** Believe me, I will tell you.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So, the uterus moved towards... You know what would be a good thing for you to say, Justin?

**Justin:** Tell me.

**Sydnee:** You know what smells best to a woman?

**Justin:** What?

**Sydnee:** Equality.

**Justin:** [laughing]

**Sydnee:** [laughing] Try that on for size.

**Justin:** I will.

**Sydnee:** You man.

**Justin:** I will stand to that truth.

**Sydnee:** So by 2nd century Rome, this idea was still widely held. And Galen, who wrote a lot of medical opinions at the time, said that he believed

that the problem was that women basically weren't freeing themselves of their...

I'm going to have to just go ahead and say what he called it. Of their female semen enough.

**Justin:** Uh... Okay?

**Sydnee:** So during... The believed—

**Justin:** Can I brief aside? Galen sounds familiar to me. Where have we talked about Galen before?

**Sydnee:** We talked about him, I think in the bloodletting episode.

**Justin:** Yeah, he had some—

**Sydnee:** He was an early physician in Rome and he wrote many opinions on many things. Many of our ideas where different medical concepts come from originate there. Some wrong, some right.

**Justin:** Galen. Gotcha.

**Sydnee:** This one wrong.

**Justin:** Nice try Galen.

**Sydnee:** So this is also why, at the time, hysteria began to be known as "the widow's disease", because the idea is that basically, intercourse could relieve hysteria.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Good job, men.

**Sydnee:** And so if a woman—

**Justin:** You dummies.



**Sydnee:** ... was no longer married, and wasn't regularly engaging in sexual activity, then she would become hysterical.

And so if she didn't have a husband, or a male partner, but it would have been a husband at the time, as a physician you could always kind of... do her a favor, in the name of science and the Hippocratic Oath.

**Justin:** Gross.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** Gross, caveman doctors. I'm thoroughly grossed out now.

**Sydnee:** We'll call it what they called it, pelvic massage.

**Justin:** Shut. Up.

**Sydnee:** Yes, pelvic massage.

**Justin:** Ugh.

**Sydnee:** So, physicians at the time... Now, this idea, we'll talk about it in a little bit, really didn't take hold until much later. But this is where it first came from, that that is how you could relieve a woman's hysteria is by causing a hysterical paroxysm.

**Justin:** Go on.

**Sydnee:** AKA, orgasm.

**Justin:** Got it. So they knew about it even then.

**Sydnee:** Well, they didn't equate the two at the time.

**Justin:** One of our many misconceptions that we've cured up over the millennia, that the female orgasm exists. We've dispelled that one. I've personally dispelled it many, many, many times.

**Sydnee:** Many, many, many, many, times.

**Justin:** Many times.

**Sydnee:** [sighs] So, the prevalent idea at the time was basically that if a woman wasn't having sex with men, her uterus was sad.

**Justin:** Aww.

**Sydnee:** And she would become hysterical. There were conflicting opinions. At the time, Soranus, who was known as kind of the father of obstetrics and gynecology, actually, he had an opposite approach.

He advocated that you don't have sex, and instead just, you know, get a massage. Take a bath. Hit the gym.

**Justin:** Treat yourself, right?

**Sydnee:** Treat yo' self!

**Justin:** Treat yourself.

**Sydnee:** That's right. Eat some chocolate. All of these are horribly sexist views of women, but that was kind of the only way people viewed women at the time.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** So-

**Justin:** Although, considering that our last suggestion was to let your doctor have sex with you, I think the hot bath maybe sounded pretty good.

**Sydnee:** Oh, now, that's a fair point Justin, but let me clarify. Your physician was not supposed to have sex with you. This was a medical procedure.

So just like our female listeners today will be familiar with when you go to get a pelvic exam, and it's very sterile.

You're covered in a sheet and you put your legs in stirrups and the doctor's doing what they do, down between your legs.

This was the same kind of situation. It was all manual.

**Justin:** Ahh...

**Sydnee:** That's what we're talking about. Just to be clear.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Still wrong, still gross, but... Not quite the same.

**Justin:** So she did it herself?

**Sydnee:** No. he did it.

**Justin:** Just...

**Sydnee:** Used his hands.

**Justin:** Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** All right, thanks.

**Sydnee:** You're welcome.

**Justin:** Sorry. And also, sorry, to basically all women all the time.

**Sydnee:** You should just keep saying that throughout this episode.

**Justin:** I plan on it, actually.

**Sydnee:** Now, from what I have read of medicine, you know, in our brief journey with this show so far, the middle ages, the dark ages, were pretty much a time when everything was gross, always.

**Justin:** Okay, and in your scientific...

**Sydnee:** That's my opinion. Because at the time, it seemed like everything just smelled bad and so that was pretty much what everybody thought the problem with everything was.

And so the solution was always to make something smell better by inserting a suppository with some potpourri in it somewhere. Or use a salve there.

And that was usually what doctors suggested at the time. "Oh, here's a tincture. Just, you know... Rub it down below and then things will smell better and then you'll feel great.

**Justin:** Now, it's important I think to... We're going so far down this treatment path. It's important to remember, I guess, that this is made up. Right?

**Sydnee:** Absolutely. Yes. If I haven't—

**Justin:** Completely... First off, it's manifestations for whatever they think hysteria was.

**Sydnee:** So, okay. Hysteria. First of all, it could have been anything that a woman exhibited that was considered improper behaviour.

But specifically, nervousness. Faintness. Insomnia. If you were having muscle spasms, shortness of breath. If you were irritable. If you didn't want to have sex, or if you did want to have a lot of sex.

If you lost your appetite or you wanted to eat a lot more. Or just the general statement, "A tendency to cause trouble."

**Justin:** [bitter laugh] God.

**Sydnee:** All of those were symptoms of hysteria.

**Justin:** So, it's basically a sort of catch-all for "You're not acting the way you're supposed to act."

**Sydnee:** Exactly. It probably originated from women who were not interested in having sex with men. And that idea would have been considered preposterous.

**Justin:** Do you think... You mentioned the widows... Calling it the Widow's Disease. Do you think that some of it may be, considering the age of most women in that category, do you think some of it could have been connected to menopause?

Because obviously we didn't understand that whatsoever.

**Sydnee:** Oh, certainly. I think it's what we would consider a bucket diagnosis. It doesn't really mean anything. It's just where you put a bunch of symptoms that aren't already otherwise assigned. If you don't know what's going on, call it hysteria.

And it's probably the first documented nervous disorder among women, so it was the first time a psychiatric disorder was diagnosed in women.

And they pretty much said, "Well, women aren't that interesting. They aren't that complicated. They were considered inferior to men, so they probably only have one psychiatric problem. We'll just name it the same thing."

I mean, that was really the prevalent idea. In the Middle Ages we have weird salves and suppositories, but there were also women who were exorcised for this. It was blamed on demonic possession

If you didn't know what was causing it, and if your treatments didn't work, well then it was probably the Devil.

**Justin:** So we tried suppositories, salves, and stuff in the Middle Ages. What do we try next?

**Sydnee:** So by the 1600s, Nathaniel Highmore, an English surgeon, put together that this was probably an orgasm, this hysterical paroxysm that we thought was... Still the prevailing idea, the cure for hysteria was probably just an orgasm.

That was when we finally put that together.

**Justin:** And because I can see the sheet in front of you, I don't want to spoil the punchline, but why don't you go ahead.

**Sydnee:** He also said that knowing this is essentially useless, because achieving a female orgasm is pretty much impossible.

And he likened it to trying to rub your tummy and pat your head at the same time.

**Justin:** Hey, listen Nathaniel, my brother, my five centuries-removed brother, I'm there with you man.

**Sydnee:** So I thought, I like that concept, that, "Well, we know what's causing it, we know what to do about it, but..."

**Justin:** [sarcastic] You might as well try to catch a unicorn.

**Sydnee:** [sarcastic] Who can do that?

**Justin:** [sarcastic] The cure might as well be leprechaun gold! We have no ability to achieve this.

**Sydnee:** Our buddy Thomas Sydenham, I believe you may remember him from our opium episode.

**Justin:** Indeed I do.

**Sydnee:** He ranked it the second most common disease. He got in on it too.

**Justin:** Yeah, of course.

**Sydnee:** And said that pretty much at some point in their lives all women are going to get it. Which just underlines the fact that this was a bucket diagnosis.

It was, sure, if a woman got PMS she was probably labelled hysterical. If she was upset about something normal, or if maybe she just didn't want to do what her husband said, or maybe if she wanted to have sex or didn't want to have sex.

All of those things. And sure, maybe things that were actual disorders like menopause... Not disorders, but you know what I mean, causing actual symptoms like menopause, or a disorder like anxiety. Everything.

**Justin:** All fell into that catch-all.

**Sydnee:** The Salem witch trials probably related to hysteria. These women probably at the time would have been labelled hysterical.

Now again, this was hysteria caused by being a witch, demonic possession, but again, this would be another example of women who were behaving badly, according to the mores of the time, labelled hysterical.

So this persisted until the 1800s, essentially.

**Justin:** Phew.

**Sydnee:** So in 1859, they began to tease out the idea that there was hysteria, there was some kind of nervous disorder that was brought on by the pressures of modern society on our poor, fragile, female countenances.

**Justin:** And it never... I mean... It never occurred to us that maybe this is not a real thing? We had so many different things that it could be connected to that it maybe is not a single issue?

**Sydnee:** No. Opposite. By 1859, Pierre Briquet thought that a quarter of women had hysteria and there was a list of at least 75 symptoms of it, and that was an incomplete list but it was the best he could do.

So the more things we blamed on hysteria, the more likely we were to... We just kept saying, "Well, it's just more common than we thought."

It was of course first in Europe it was diagnosed, and then in the young America, as more women were diagnosed with hysteria, it was a sign that the country was becoming more modern.

**Justin:** [laughs] Finally, your country is progressive enough to freak women out.

**Sydnee:** [sarcastic] We're quite cosmopolitan now. We have fully 20 percent of our women diagnosed with hysteria.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] We really feel like with just a couple more tall buildings and some faster-paced music, we could get that up to 24 or 25 percent by the end of the century.

**Sydnee:** At this point though, in the 1800s, that was really when we kind of pinned the problem. Because nobody still... Since it wasn't a real thing, you couldn't say what caused it. There was no evidence as to where it came from.

So we really began to pin it on this idea that women were not having enough hysterical paroxysms. And the number one symptom they began citing, of hysteria, was erotic fantasy and excessive vaginal lubrication.

**Justin:** [snorts] I'm sorry women, I don't mean to laugh. It comes from a place of sadness, I assure you. We're just despicable, and I mean, I can't do anything for you now. And I am sorry.

Again, as Sydnee predicted, I am apologizing to you once again. I am the only male representative on the program, so I feel like I'm taking an undue amount of heat. But I am just totally... Just wicked sorry.

So super, super sorry again.



**Sydnee:** We're making jokes about it, but it's a really interesting topic if you do some reading online.

I looked at the national medical library at the National Institute of Health, and it had a free article that was written charting the progress of hysteria through the centuries and the way that it shaped our view of women.

And it's really fascinating how this disease, you can't even call it that, but this concept, this false concept, has shaped women's' role throughout a lot of history. Whether it is—

**Justin:** Most. The vast majority of history, right?

**Sydnee:** Exactly. Whether it is as this wild temptress, this creature that is prone to lead men to sin, or this fragile, nervous, frail thing that we must protect or the way that women are accused of using sex as a weapon, holding it over mens' heads.

All of this gets tied into this concept of hysteria, which was basically a man's way of saying, "This woman isn't doing what I want her to do, and I'm going to call her sick."

**Justin:** Yeah, and I think it's actually a really instructive example of society using, a male-dominated society, using its structural powers, the control it has over the system as a whole, rather than a one-on-one, "I control you."

It's the system being built... It's a rigged game for women. Any behaviour that wasn't in lockstep with how men saw their role at the time could be blamed on it.

**Sydnee:** And even the women... I think it's interesting to take a quick step back to the Middle Ages. Even the women of the time, there was a female physician, believe it or not, Trotula de Ruggerio, even she wrote about hysteria as if it was an actual thing.

And the best she could say is, "Well, it's probably not good, if sex is the cure." Sex, at the time was still viewed as kind of a sinful idea for women to just engage in for their own pleasure.

So she advised taking sedatives to calm you down, basically quell your sexual desires. Take some mint and some musk oil and take a nap and get over it.

So even women who were writing about it at the time were within that same context. They held the same biases that men had placed on them.

**Justin:** Well, I would imagine...

This is just extrapolation on my part and no small amount of wishful thinking, but I imagine there were probably some women who would take solace in the idea of a disorder that could explain any feelings that you yourself weren't crazy about, or urges you yourself didn't like.

I mean, we see that today with disorders and stuff that are not real. But people take a lot of comfort, some people take a lot of comfort, in the idea that this illness is responsible for any struggles they may be having in life.

**Sydnee:** Absolutely.

And without naming anything, so that we don't cause problems, there are certainly examples of this that some physicians would point to within our medical lexicon today, that are these same concepts of a basket diagnosis or a bucket diagnosis.

That we don't know what it is, what causes it, and our symptoms and presentations can be varied, but we're going to call it all the same thing because that's simpler.

But I think what's really important, Justin, that we haven't talked about yet, is that starting in the 1850s, we finally got serious about how to treat this awful malady.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Thank God. Let's get those friggin' wombs in their place.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. And let me clarify, at this point, the idea that the womb was actually moving was pretty much done away with.

**Justin:** Oh, okay. So we still thought hysteria was real, but the cause that we came up [with] for it, we didn't think was real anymore?

**Sydnee:** No. We pretty much...

Actually, Soranus, if we go all the way back to Rome, Soranus was the first one to say, "You know what? The uterus probably stays in pretty much the same place except for when it's prolapsed much, much later in life. So it's probably not the problem."

And the idea that this had to do with either sexual repression or sexual desire or something like that became much more prevalent. It was still not well-understood.

But it is this theory that led to the first treatment, the first kind of prescribed treatment in the 1800s, the pelvic douche. Similar to the idea of a douche that no-one should use today, except you just direct a stream of pressured water at the pelvis until you "feel better."

**Justin:** I mean... That sounds refreshing.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** To me.

**Sydnee:** Does it, Justin?

**Justin:** I guess? I don't know what it's like in there.

**Sydnee:** I like the simplicity of that, but what I like even better is that in 1869 there was an American physician, George Taylor, who said, "Forget that noise. This is America now. We do things steam-powered. I'm going to build the first steam-powered vibrator, thank you very much."

**Justin:** All right!

**Sydnee:** Yup. it was essentially a big table that you were strapped to that had a hole in it with a vibrating sphere that you stuck in the hole.

**Justin:** And ladies loved it.

**Sydnee:** Uh... Well, I don't know if they loved it, but I'm sure they used it.

**Justin:** You're welcome women. [sarcastic] See, men giveth a very small thing and they taketh away a vastly larger amount. But hey, you got that out of the deal, huh?

**Sydnee:** You have to understand though—

**Justin:** Couldn't vote—

**Sydnee:** These were medical devices, so as we go through this history, these were not to be used alone. A woman was not to take her giant steam-powered vibrating table to the basement, strap herself to it and have fun.

**Justin:** [as 1800s husband] "Honey? Honey! Was that you? I heard on the stairs, it sounded like... Honey! It sounded like someone was pushing a big metal table down the stairs. You okay?"

**Sydnee:** [as 1800s wife] "I'll be up in a minute!"

**Justin:** [as 1800s husband] "You need any help?"

**Sydnee:** [as 1800s wife] "Just a minute!"

**Justin:** [as 1800s husband] "I'll come help you."

**Sydnee:** [as 1800s wife] "Leave me alone!"

**Justin:** [as 1800s husband] "Let me get some of the neighborhood men. We'll all come help you carry that metal table down the stairs."

**Sydnee:** No, this was done under the supervision of a physician, or at the very least, if you were going to have this in your home, under the supervision of your husband. Don't do this alone.

And this continued to apply to the 1880s version, when Joseph Mortimer Granville invented the battery-powered vibrator. [sarcastic] It only weighed about 40 pounds.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Perfect, convenient. Put it in your purse.

**Sydnee:** And physicians were thrilled, because you have to remember, up until this point they were still actively causing hysterical paroxysms for women. This late.

**Justin:** Yeah, that's insane.

**Sydnee:** There's actually a great movie about this. Well, I say it's great. I read about it, I haven't seen it yet, called *Hysteria*, where they document a physician who spent so much time catering to the needs of wealthy English women that he got carpal tunnel.

And so, out of desperation created the battery-powered vibrator.

**Justin:** Gonna have to Netflix that.

**Sydnee:** And physicians at the time did actually... They were thrilled with this, because they said that this "terrible task", with which you know, their Hippocratic Oath forced them to perform for women, that took hours, now only took minutes.

**Justin:** I actually do believe that, but you know there was one guy... There was one who they'd all call. Like, "Ugh. Just get Weird Dave. He loves this. I don't know."

**Sydnee:** Freud of course jumped in on this topic. You know, why wouldn't he? This seems ripe for Freud in the 1890s. Him and another physician, Joseph Brewer, kind of came up with the idea that you could talk women out of it.

Just bring up all their repressed memories and their sexual needs and...

**Justin:** I mean, that's closer... I mean... While obviously hysteria's still not a real thing... I mean, that's closer to at least some sort of actual... At least they were talking through whatever was the perceived problem.

**Sydnee:** I think that's fair. We have to assume there were women who were not just not doing what their husband said but who actually had maybe conversion disorder.

That's one theory. That maybe had anxiety. Who, some kind of talk therapy would have been helpful, for the treatment of that.

So it's certainly possible that this was closer, for some women, to a cure. But you also have to understand that there were probably women who had epilepsy that were called hysteria as well.

**Justin:** All right. Fine. So what I'm saying, in my Great Male Gender Apology Tour of 2013, what I'm saying is we may have accidentally helped a small percentage of the women.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. We may have accidentally helped someone.

**Justin:** Okay. That's all I need.

**Sydnee:** By the late 1890s, I think this is great, it was recognized that another... If you couldn't afford a battery-powered vibrator, you could ride a horse, ride in a carriage, or vigorously use a rocking chair, to alleviate your own symptoms.

Or, you could buy an electric saddle machine for your home. Which essentially is like one of those toy horses that you can put a quarter in and kids can ride outside the grocery store.

**Justin:** Only not shaped like a horse, I'm assuming?

**Sydnee:** Just the saddle.

**Justin:** Just the saddle.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm. And women could keep those in their homes. And in the 1900s, all—

**Justin:** That's actually central to the plot of *Urban Cowboy*, if you've never seen that.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] By the 1900s, all kinds of vibrator machines—

**Justin:** Is that the name of that movie?

**Sydnee:** ... existed. I don't even know.

**Justin:** Yeah, that John Travolta movie where he's a...

**Sydnee:** Is it?

**Justin:** ... a mechanical bull rider?

**Sydnee:** Oh! Yeah, I don't know.

**Justin:** I don't know either.

**Sydnee:** But by the 1900s there were all kinds of vibrators available. It was actually the fifth home appliance to be electrified.

So they made the sewing machine, the electric fan, the electric kettle, the toaster, and then the vibrator.

**Justin:** Priorities.

**Sydnee:** It beat out the vacuum, and the iron, by over a decade. [laughs]

**Justin:** Geez-o-Pete, really?

**Sydnee:** Exactly. I know! And this whole time people are still saying this is strictly for medical use.

**Justin:** There is no more—

**Sydnee:** There is nothing pleasurable about it.

**Justin:** I mean, there is no better indicator, I think, of how small a role women played in medicine that no one had delved any deeper into this question.

**Sydnee:** Nope, this is... "You can use these, and your husband can watch you and help you."

They actually advertised these machines for the whole family. Not to be used in the same area, perhaps. But hold it on your face, or your arms or your back. Vibrate something. Vibrations were essential to a healthy life.

**Justin:** We had that stupid machine with the belt that would help you lose weight.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, that's that same kind of idea, that those vibrations were good. And some of them were marketed as weight loss machines. I mean, they weren't.

**Justin:** They weren't. None of this was real, but hey.

**Sydnee:** None of it was real. And by the 1920s, these machines started showing up in pornography, and people started being honest about what they really were.

Which kind of shoved them underground for a while, and in the 50s they showed back up, but people were pretty uptight then. So they kind of fell out of favour.

And then finally in 1952, at long last, everybody wisened up and the American Psychological Association said, "You know what? This is bunk. Hysteria's not a real thing."



**Justin:** [As the 1952 APA] People just like to masturbate. Let's just let it go, guys. Hey, listen, we had a good run. It's been 4000 years. Let's give it up.

**Sydnee:** So the term "hysteria" was dropped from the diagnostic catalogue. There was no diagnosis made and we realized that there were probably lots of other problems that we missed or things that weren't problems at all that we just didn't like.

I thought this was interesting, as I went on my tour of sex toys throughout history, that in Alabama you still can't buy a sex toy for anything other than medical purposes. At least as of 2009.

**Justin:** That's why you gotta get to [extremerestraints.com](http://extremerestraints.com), they'll sell it to you. They don't care.

**Sydnee:** [laughing] Hey, wrong show, wrong show. No, you have to sign a waiver that says, "This is strictly for medical purposes" when you buy it.

So trust me, I just have hysteria. Wink, wink.

**Justin:** Wink. Hint, hint.

We hope you've had a hysterical laughter listening to this.

**Sydnee:** I think we're still allowed to use that word. That's the one thing I don't know from my research. Can I still say "hysterical"?

**Justin:** I think it's lost some of the gender, you know, the gender.... You know, the connotations.

**Sydnee:** I hope so. And I should make this quick note, Justin, there were men who were diagnosed with hysteria, throughout history.

**Justin:** Wow, really?

**Sydnee:** Yeah. there were times where it was considered a thing that might infect men. Later, after it was decided that it wasn't because the uterus was moving around.

But this is largely a disease of women. That is the part of our society that it impacted, us.

**Justin:** Us.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** You. Sorry.

**Sydnee:** Whoa.

**Justin:** Hey.

**Sydnee:** Whoa.

**Justin:** Hey.

**Sydnee:** You wish.

**Justin:** Thank you so much for listening to Sawbones. We hope you've had as much fun listening as we've had making it.

**Sydnee:** Thank you Rachel for your great topic suggestion.

**Justin:** Yes, thank you soon-to-be McElroy. We hope you enjoyed the suggestion.

You can follow us on Twitter. If you want to suggest a show topic, just send a tweet to @sawbones. We actually ask that you do that whenever you're tweeting about the show.

Maybe you want to share a link to our iTunes page, we would sure appreciate that, or a link to [maximumfun.org](http://maximumfun.org), where our show lives, along

with many other fantastic programs. *Jordan, Jesse, Go!* and *Stop Podcasting Yourself*.

**Sydnee:** *My Brother, My Brother, and Me*.

**Justin:** So many other fantastic programs. We hope you'll check those out. Go to the forums, talk about the show, tell a friend about it. Follow us on Twitter.

**Sydnee:** Tweet at us, @justinmcelroy.

**Justin:** And @sydneemcelroy. It's S-Y-D-N-E-E. Make sure you join us again next Friday for Sawbones.

I'm Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:** I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[Outro, *Medicines* by the Taxpayers plays]

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