

Sawbones 294: The Hippocratic Oath

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Clint: 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.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: There's been a—there's a switch on the front of my microphone. It says 'pad,' and one setting is negative ten dB, and one is zero. For the past three weeks, my microphone has been too quiet, and I have had no idea why. In the seconds preceding this, I just found that little switch and flipped it, and all is fixed.

Sydnee: Ahh. I had the same problem when I was recording Still Buff, 'cause I used that mic.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Yes, that makes sense now.

Justin: The long nightmare is over with us audio professionals.

Sydnee: I just thought Raleigh was really loud. I was like, "Wow, I never noticed how loud my sister is." Uh, Justin, I got an interesting email that inspired this week's topic.

Justin: Humble brag.

Sydnee: We are—what?

Justin: That you got an interesting email. It's just like... good. I'd love to get one too.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, Sawbones did. Sawbones, the show, did. So you got it as well. It's just, I'm the one who checks them.

Justin: I gotcha.

Sydnee: Uh, literally, I have to forward emails to Justin's other email account for him to read them, because I—

Justin: I feel like, personally—

Sydnee: I am solely responsible for those.

Justin: I feel I am a digital professional and have been so for the past 15 years. I feel it's important for one person to have dominion over each email address, or else you're gonna lose things. Things will slip between the cracks. Did I read that, did I not read that, did I respond, did I not respond?

Sydnee: Well, it's me!

Justin: Yes, Sydnee has volunteered, in this case, to be the one who...

Sydnee: Add it to the invisible work of women.

Justin: But it's—

Sydnee: Our invisible work that we are unappreciated for.

Justin: Now, that's not fair, because I make Griffin read My Brother, My Brother, and Me, and Travis read The Adventure Zone emails, so... it is spread around very evenly.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: And Dan reads The Empty Bowl emails. But other than that...

Sydnee: Are there any more podcasts you do you'd like to plug, or...

Justin: I'm just plugging the fact that I don't read the emails. It's supposed to be a bit.

Sydnee: [laughing]

Justin: That's the bit is that I make everybody else read the emails.

Sydnee: Can I tell you about the email now?

Justin: Yeah. I guess.

Sydnee: I got an email from Ashley who asked if doctors really do pledge an oath to Apollo. Is that what the Hippocratic oath is? Are we actually like, swearing to Apollo or pledging to Apollo? Like, god of the sun, Apollo.

Justin: Is that true?

Sydnee: Well, I had to stop after I read that email and think, "Did I?"

Justin: Did I?

Sydnee: "Did I do that?"

Justin: If Apollo came to my door and was like, "Uh, Sydnee... I need a ride to the mall."

Sydnee: "You pledged an oath to meee."

Justin: "You pledged an oath to meee. I need \$30." Would you have to...

Sydnee: Well, that's what I thought... y'know, I've read the Hippocratic oath many times in reference to various things on the show, and about Hippocrates, but I... I couldn't remember, what oath did I do? And was it that one? And it had some wack stuff in it, so probably not. So anyway, thank you Ashley, and also Alise and Logan and Leigh, who have also suggested this topic.

Because I thought we would dig a little bit into what the Hippocratic oath is, and what doctors actually do or don't do today. Because it's... it's changed. It's changed.

Justin: It's changed.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Now, this is a surprise to me, because you think Hippocratic oath. Well, one, oaths are like, oaths. You can't just like, make one up. And Hippocratic, that fool was around hundreds of years ago.

Sydnee: Hippocratic.

Justin: Hip—hippo—Hippocrates was around.

Sydnee: Hippocratic and Socrates [pronounced "so-crates"].

Justin: Hip—Hippocrates was around hundreds of years ago.

Sydnee: Plateau.

Justin: Um, okay. Is this the kind of episode it's gonna be, where you're just gonna be givin' me static the whole time? That's fine. I don't even care, Sydnee.

Sydnee: 400 BCE. That's when. Supposedly.

Justin: So yeah, hundreds—tens of hundreds of years ago.

Sydnee: Uh, supposedly. Although, y'know, there's been debate over whether, was it really Hippocrates? Was it sort of like a group effort? Like, physicians who studied under Hippocrates, like, part of the Hippocratic school? Was it something that was done after him, maybe? Like, in his honor, but after he had already died?

There's a lot of debate about this, and I'll get into some of the reason there's debate is some of the stuff that's in it that doesn't seem to jive exactly with the rest of the Hippocratic corpus. Like, the rest of his body of works. There's some stuff that, y'know... mm, I don't know if this makes total sense.

Now, it was... it was in line with Hippocrates in the sense that... he approached medicine from a very holistic point of view. Right? The idea that, it's not like there's a thing... there's an issue on this arm, and here is the thing that goes on this arm that treats that thing for arms. Whatever. The idea that like, the whole person was the patient.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: I know what you're gonna say. I know where we're going with this.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That you can't treat...

Justin: The...

Sydnee: You can't treat a disease... [laughs]

Justin: Patch says... Patch says, you treat the... treat... you treat the disease, you win the— you lose. You treat the person, you win every time. Coming to theaters this fall, Patch. Justin McElroy stars in *The Patch Adams*, a remake of the original *Patch Adams*. This generation's—his generation's

Robin Williams, Justin McElroy, takes on those big floppy shoes, and that hilarious stethoscope, with the...

Sydnee: Was it a hilarious stethoscope? I think it was just a regular...

Justin: Every time he put it on their chest, it makes fart noises.

Sydnee: Normal stethoscope...

Justin: Every time you put it on their chest, it makes fart noises.

Sydnee: I think the nose was the thing.

Justin: Yeah, but every time you put it on their chest, it makes fart noises. That's the—that's in the new one.

Sydnee: That's my nightmare, by the way. If I go to the bad place when I die, it will be, I will have to use a stethoscope that makes fart noises all the time. [laughs]

Justin: Well, it's tested very well with audiences in *The Patch Adams*, starring Justin McElroy, so... we're probably gonna leave that bit in. Sorry.

Sydnee: So, anyway, that general idea, that there is something special about... about medicine, about the medical art, about being a physician in terms of how you relate to your patient, that idea is very in line with Hippocrates. And that's what the oath speaks to, right? The idea that this isn't just about like, oh, you have a sore throat? Here's the pill for sore throat. Bye.

It's, how are you feeling? How is this affecting you? What is it doing to your life? How can I help improve all of that? And that's a much higher calling, so to speak, than, what is the thing that treats this illness? Does that make sense?

Justin: Yeah. Absolutely.

Sydnee: So, the original oath, and I don't want to read the entire thing. I want to kind of—

Justin: 'Cause if you read it out loud, that's binding.

Sydnee: Then I've taken it.

Justin: You've overwritten your last oath.

Sydnee: [laughs] The original oath, I want to kind of go through some of the points of it that make it, uh, you probably will guess, have been changed in today's world. First of all, it does start off, "I swear by Apollo, physician by Asclepius, by Hygeia, by Panacea..." So it's not just Apollo. You're swearing by a lot of gods, there.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, yes, that is true. Now, I will say that I am 99.9% certain I did not say that.

Justin: [laughs] You would remember all that, right?

Sydnee: I have looked up... I have tried to Google what my medical school, which oath they took

Justin: Do you want me to—I was just look—I was looking. I was gonna look for your... I thought I filmed your induction, but I think I was thinking of my cousin Megan, who I filmed her induction.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Yes, I think you're right.

Justin: I remember that. It's basically the same thing. Although, wouldn't it be the same, now that I think about it?

Sydnee: Well, it should've been the same.

Justin: Probably.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, med schools have changed over time, but most have like, kind of picked one and stuck with it.

Justin: I swear by... okay.

Sydnee: Uh, and by all the gods and goddesses. Actually, that's the next part. So you're swearing by all the gods and goddesses.

Justin: What a waste of time! Here, I'm gonna edit on the fly. "I swear by all the gods and goddesses."

Sydnee: There you go. You don't need to name any. But they name the important ones, I guess. So, some of the things you're swearing to do. So here's your oath. First of all, you're going to hold your teacher in this art equal to your parents. So like, whoever teaches you medicine is like, your new medicine...

Justin: Your medicine dad.

Sydnee: Medicine dad or medicine mom. Ahem. Either way.

Justin: Not back then.

Sydnee: Medicine parent.

Justin: Not back then.

Sydnee: Well, yeah. Uh, when he's in need of money, to share mine with him. [laughs]

Justin: What?

Sydnee: Yeah. If I'm learning medicine from somebody, and they need money...

Justin: Uh, hey, Hippocrates. It's Dan. The medical teacher? Listen, can you slide... [laughs] I got a lot of—why don't you slide in for me?

Sydnee: Do you know how much trouble I'd get in if I started hittin' up my medical students and residents for money?

Justin: Can you just put a line in there... put a line in there...

Sydnee: That would be so wrong. That'd be so wrong.

Justin: Put a line there about like, if your teacher's hard up for cash, you're just gonna slide 'em 20 drachma.

Sydnee: Now, on the flip side, you pledge to teach your art without fee.

Justin: Um, well, yeah, that's why your teacher needs money. [laughing]

Sydnee: This is a problem, and obviously has been changed in modern versions, because as you may or may not know, medical school is really expensive.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So we definitely charge medical students. I would say, as a former medical student, too much to be a doctor.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: We use treatment to help with sick, according to my ability and judgment. Yeah, that's good. Don't do injury, no wrongdoing, uh, I will not administer poison...

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: That's good.

Justin: Uh, well, actually, y'know... I bet y'all can't do that anymore, though, right?

Sydnee: No. Because...

Justin: Stuff like chemotherapy.

Sydnee: Right, that has toxicity, but also benefits. Yeah, I mean, obviously things are more nuanced than this. And especially the next two sections speak to, one, that you will never cause an abortion, and two, that you will never, what they say, uh, use the knife. Basically they're saying, I won't do surgery.

Justin: Hmm. Now, is that because it was a different, um...

Sydnee: It was different. Surgery was more of like a trade. Like a skill. And it wasn't...

Justin: So this is like, I'll stay in my lane.

Sydnee: Yeah, it was. It was kind of like, I'll do the things I know how to do, but it also specifically prohibits abortion. And two, these are two of the reasons why people have debated over whether Hippocrates actually wrote this, just to kind of get into that. Other places in Hippocrates writings, he talks about how to do surgeries. Specifically, they mention, on sufferers from stone. They're talking about like, kidney stones or bladder stones here, and they say like, "I will not cut for the stone" is another quote you'll hear.

He describes how to do that. So it seems weird that he would take it—have you take an oath never to do it, and then also describe how to do it. I think the idea that 'stay in your lane' is part of this, sure, but it's a weird... it's a weird phrase. Same with abortion. He actually describes how to do one in another place in his writings, without any sort of like, commentary on whether or not you should. And so, it seems weird that, then, that would be put in the oath that you shouldn't later.

So that's part of why people debate like, was this added later, maybe? And wasn't...

Justin: Somebody trying to make a point.

Sydnee: Yeah. Um, he says that uh, into whatever houses you enter, you will not do any wrongdoing or harm. You will not abuse the bodies of man or woman, bond or free. Part of this is that, I won't have sex with my patients, is part of what is being spoken to. That part stays the same throughout all oaths, pretty much.

Justin: Seems sound.

Sydnee: Most oaths you take say, don't... don't do it with your patients.

Justin: Please.

Sydnee: Please.

Justin: Please, doctors.

Sydnee: And he also says, "Whatever I shall see or hear in the course of profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets."

Justin: Now, I thought we weren't supposed to have sex with our patients, and he's talking about having...

Sydnee: Ha ha ha.

Justin: Ha ha ha.

Sydnee: Ha ha ha. So, patient privacy, right there, from the jump. The things I learn, I will... and obviously, that is still true to this day. And then there's a part about, if I carry out this oath, I will get a great reputation, and

if I break it, and forswear myself, may the opposite befall me. So... people will say bad things about me if I break my oath is basically what that says.

Justin: And I'll deserve it. 'Cause I knew what I was doing.

Sydnee: As I have eluded to, there are some things in there that don't hold up in today's modern medical world. And there are some things that, again, do not seem to fall in line with even what we really understood of Hippocrates, or the Hippocratic tradition of medicine. The fact that it has kind of a religious tone, y'know? It has like, this sacred, holy calling feel to it.

Even that is a little contradictory to what we really think about, especially if we look at Galen, who kind of followed in the Hippocratic tradition. It's a lot more pragmatic. It's a lot more about... we have learned all these things that can help people feel better, but it's not, "I am doing it because of a sacred trust." It's, "I'm doing it because I learned how and I'm good at it."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, I do the right things, 'cause why would you do the wrong things? I want to be good at my job. Does that—y'know, like, that kind of difference.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, it's debatable, either way. Was it Hippocrates? Was it his followers? Was it some people who sort of followed Hippocrates, but also wanted to make their own points, had their own spin on it? And has it changed over time? Because the oath obviously dates back to ancient history, but it wasn't used for all time.

It was really rediscovered in the 1500s, so... what happened between 400 BCE, and the, y'know, and 1500 CE?

Justin: Just a bunch of people out there, oathless doctors, making it up as they went along.

Sydnee: Just doing whatever they wanted. German scholars translated it in the 1500s, and basically, they kind of took some parts of it, but it was really adapted to like, Christianity. That was the overriding value system that it was adapted into. So then, when you start wondering, did Hippocrates really write all this? You have to start wondering when it was translated and adopted. Were changes made at some point? I'm not suggesting they were. Nobody is. But I mean, y'know, you have to wonder if stuff doesn't fit, where were these—where did these ideas come from?

In the 1700s, it was translated into English, and other languages, and it really became—that's when we start to see it become associated with medicine more and more. And you start seeing like, doctors take that original oath that we just discussed from the 1700s on. Um, so, for a while, yeah, docs were swearing to all the gods and goddesses, including Apollo.

Now, by the 1900s, the idea that we might need something more modern was starting to take root. 'Cause most people weren't... praying to Apollo.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: By the 1900s. And uh, especially after World War II, the idea of like a real, modern code that was taken more seriously, you can see why all of a sudden that idea might become more important. Uh, prior to that, this belief that a doctor would use their skills and abilities to intentionally do harm, or experiment on humans who were vulnerable, uh... that idea was, I guess theoretically possible, but wasn't really widely accepted.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It was kind of just, "Well, of course a doctor will do the right thing. They're a doctor." After World War II, more and more people realized that, well, no, actually, y'know, it doesn't matter if you're a doctor or not. All humans are capable of bad things. And so, a code of ethics that doctors should enter into became very important.

Justin: Yeah, I can see that.

Sydnee: So uh, so the World Medical Association actually wrote the Declaration of Geneva. And it echoed many of the sentiments of the original oath, but it took it into like a secular world. No gods or goddesses.

Justin: Only man.

Sydnee: And they didn't—[laughs] And they didn't prohibit surgery. It was just, y'know, basically, you should follow a... this code of like, don't do bad things to people. Don't intentionally harm people. I won't experiment on people, I won't take advantage of vulnerable populations, I won't discriminate against people for race or religion, and that kind of thing.

Justin: That seems sound.

Sydnee: Right. So, some really basic ideas that made a lot of sense. What's interesting is, a few decades after that, the USSR actually made their own version.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: You can find like, the soviet. And it's very similar to this oath from the World Medical Association, from the Declaration of Geneva, except that it adds... and you can find this where like, you get this base oath that everybody takes, except for each organization or group or country or time has added their own little spin on it.

Justin: A little bit of paprika.

Sydnee: So they add into it, "To preserve and develop the noble traditions of soviet medicine to be guided in all my actions by the principles of communist morality, and to always bear in mind the high calling of a soviet physician, and my responsibility to the people into the soviet state."

They also add, "Recognizing the danger which nuclear weaponry presents for mankind to struggle tirelessly for peace and for the prevention of nuclear war." Which is an interesting thing to throw in a doctor oath.

Justin: Yeah, absolutely.

Sydnee: I would—I think I am capable of many things. I don't know that I can prevent nuclear war?

Justin: Yeah, I don't know that you would... if there's a—no, I mean, I'm trying to come up with anything.

Sydnee: I mean, I would do it if I could.

Justin: For sure.

Sydnee: Like, I'm for that. I am anti-nuclear war.

Justin: We're definitely... that is the side that we are both on, I feel like.

Sydnee: That's something that me and the soviet doctors who took this oath have in common. I don't know that I could take an oath to do it, 'cause I don't know how I would. But I mean, if I can. I'll pledge that. If I have the opportunity to prevent nuclear war...

Justin: You're on it.

Sydnee: I will do so.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: My pledge to Apollo.

Justin: There's gotta be more, Syd. We got hundreds of years left.

Sydnee: Yes, we do.

Justin: Well... dozens.

Sydnee: And you probably want to know. All these oaths that I've mentioned are probably not the ones people are taking today, right? So, we are gonna talk about, what oaths are doctors taking today? But before we do that... let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Our first sponsor this week is Zip Recruiter! A business without employees is but a brand. Confucius.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Interesting... sorry. Socrates. Uh, it's an interesting chunk of wisdom. If you need employees to turn your brand into a business, you gotta turn to Zip Recruiter. The best in the biz. Café Altera's CEO, Dylan Moskowitz, needed to hire a director of coffee. Went to Zip Recruiter, posted the job, found the best person for the role in just a few days. How, you ask?

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Try Zip Recruiter right now. It's ZipRecruiter.com/Sawbones. And no wonder that four out of five employers who post on Zip Recruiter get a quality candidate within the first day. Join those four out of five success stories. You could be one of the four out of the five. Just go—

Sydnee: Maybe you'll be the fifth.

Justin: Maybe you'll be the fifth.

Sydnee: And make it five out of five.

Justin: Make it five out of five. It's 'cause you weren't there. Zip Recruiter: The smartest way to hire.

We also want to talk about Squarespace. I love building websites, Sydnee. Well, technically, I love registering domains to websites that point to things that I already own. But, I have made some websites in the past. They've all been garbage. Y'know why?

Sydnee: You didn't use Squarespace.

Justin: Yes, exactly. And I don't like to drag myself, but if I had turned to Squarespace instead of Dan's Discount HTML Barn, I could've been able to showcase my work, blog or publish content, sell products. My current website is just a dancing chicken with a sign that says 'Under Construction' underneath it. That's what I got. I paid \$400 for it.

But Squarespace would've given me beautiful, customizable, mobile-optimized templates created by world-class designers, 24/7 award-winning customer support, and built-in search engine optimization. I've made a terrible mistake! Don't be like me! Just go to [Squarespace.com/Sawbones](https://www.squarespace.com/Sawbones) for a free trial. And when you're ready to launch, use the offer code 'Sawbones' to save 10% off your first purchase of a website or a domain.

The copy points have not said 'Squarespace: Build it beautiful' for several months, but I still feel compelled to say Squarespace: Build it beautiful, 'cause it's such a good tagline, I feel like.

Sydnee: I'm sure it doesn't hurt.

Justin: On Giantbomb, they put a comma in there, so it becomes, "Squarespace. Build it, beautiful."

Sydnee: Oh!

Justin: I like it. Saucy. Uh, so, Syd, we had some more...

Sydnee: Oaths.

Justin: Oaths. Well, I guess different oaths, different permutations of the classic.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: The original flavor oath.

Sydnee: Uh, so, there were some who still thought that a more thorough modern oath... thoroughly modern oath... was needed.

Justin: Thoroughly modern oathy.

Sydnee: And so, I want to talk for a moment about Dr. Louis Lasagna, who...

Justin: [laughs] Give me a second. I'm okay.

Sydnee: I... he is no longer with us, and it's a shame, because I feel like if Dr. Lasagna was alive today, he would be a friend of the show. He'd be... I'm a big fan.

Justin: [quietly laughing]

Sydnee: There are moments when I'm researching this show... let me give you a little peek behind the curtain. There are moments when I'm researching this show where I start to read about somebody in medical history, and I get this like, shiver, 'cause I realize that I'm like, connecting to them. Like, through time. I feel close to them, and like, I hope that I'm carrying on some of the principles that this person embodied. I don't know. And I felt this way with Dr. Louis Lasagna. I'm getting like, teary thinking about it.

Justin: I feel the same way about Dr. Louis Lasagna. Are you kidding me with this name!?

Sydnee: He's... he's a great doc—just listen.

Justin: You're tearing up!

Sydnee: I am! Just listen. Just listen. So he came from humble beginnings. The son of Italian immigrants, he studied at Columbia, he was fascinated by pharmacology. He went on to teach at John Hopkins. And in his more than 50 years in medicine, he was—he became a consultant to the FDA. And a lot of other organizations in the US. Basically, to help with the way that we study and develop and regulate drugs. Medications.

When he kind of came onto the scene, it was like... it was like the wild west, when you introduced a new medication. A pharmaceutical company could just send out samples to some doctors and encourage them to use it, and eventually, people would just be using it, and you didn't have to have like, randomized control trials to prove that it worked, and that it was not dangerous, and that it wouldn't, y'know, kill half the people who took it and all that.

And Dr. Lasagna was one of the people who were saying, listen, there is a way to do this. We can do it scientifically. We can do this in a smart way. We can figure out which medicines work and which medicines don't, and we can give the right ones to people as opposed to just whatever makes a pharmaceutical company money. So, I already—I mean, right? Like, you already like this guy.

Justin: Yeah. No no, you don't have to sell me on Dr. Louis Lasagna. I was down.

Sydnee: That is what he dedicated a lot of his life to. He wrote or co-wrote 655 papers. He wrote two very popular books. Some other books, too, but two very popular. The Doctor's Dilemma, and Life, Death, and the Doctor. Which, by the way, The Doctor's Dilemma, one of the books he wrote, was uh... here's one description of it. "An unusually readable account of the complex development of medical practice from a confusion of superstition and ignorance in its earliest days, down to its present."

That could be our show, honey!

Justin: You're right. He was Sawbones before we were.

Sydnee: He was Sawbones before Sawbones was Sawbones! He uh, talked about like, popular alternative medicines, and criticized them, and why they weren't working, and like, took 'em to task. And then he talked about famous quacks.

Justin: We gotta get this guy on the show.

Sydnee: Well, he's not—he passed away in 2003. But...

Justin: Oh, sorry. I ruined the end of your story.

Sydnee: I already said that.

Justin: I know how you love to kill people, at the end.

Sydnee: Anyway, he was a good guy. He fought drug companies. He fought their ridiculous advertising claims, he fought the price fixing, he fought hidden drug toxicity, he fought to tell doctors how to give appropriate doses. There was a time where if a doctor gave you penicillin, and it didn't work for what you had, he would just give you more of it.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Which isn't how...

Justin: It doesn't work that way.

Sydnee: Doesn't work that way. [laughs] Higher doses are not always the answer, and often they're not. So anyway, cool guy. He was also president of the Rochester Orchestra, and he funded a local dance troop, and he had his own theater company called the Mighty Lasagna Players.

Justin: Ooh, that's good!

Sydnee: Which was made up of the department of pharmacology, medical, and toxicology students and faculty.

Justin: Ohh, the Mighty Lasagna Players is my favorite third wave ska band, hands down.

Sydnee: And I introduced you to Dr. Lasagna because he wrote a new version of the oath. And it became pretty popular as the years went on. I thought, for a minute, this may have been the one that I took. But there were some phrases that I feel like I would have remembered. Uh, first of all, it takes out all of the gods and goddesses. You just... swear. To fulfill...

Justin: To whatever you kind of...

Sydnee: To whatever you choose to swear to. To yourself, to whatever gods, goddesses, or not divinities you choose. Basically, that you're gonna do the right thing, you're gonna use your knowledge to help people, um, that you are going to... I like this – avoid those twin traps of overtreatment and therapeutic nihilism.

Justin: Yeah, we could use some of that.

Sydnee: I feel like I would've remembered that.

Justin: Yeah. Therapeutic nihilism is very punchy.

Sydnee: He talks about how he'll respect the privacy of his patients. Right? "I will not be ashamed to say I know not." Man, that's important. That—you need to say that once a year in medicine. I think that's an important thing to say.

Justin: I say that once a day.

Sydnee: In life, right? Not just in medicine. In all things. Um, and then, he talks about treading carefully in the matters of life and death. "If it is given to me to save a life, all thanks, but it may also be within my power to take a life. This awesome responsibility must be faced with great humbleness and awareness of my own frailty. I must not play at God."

Uh, I think that um... so, kind of talking to some of the ideas that they previously discussed in the oath, but with more nuance.

Justin: Yeah, and it's also a little bit more, um... what's the word? Like, readable. Prose-like. I don't know, I'm not good with... I don't know language stuff.

Sydnee: He says, "I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being."

Justin: So he is sort of saying there, if I could go inside... what he's sort of saying there is, you treat the disease, you win, you lose. You treat the patient, you win every time. The Patch Adams, coming to theaters. It did get delayed since the first half of the show. It's now gonna be December 2025. But it is gonna be all CG. We're taking a lot of extra time. So... gonna be— it's gonna be a huge flick. We may do a—

Sydnee: Everybody's very excited. Everybody's very excited.

Justin: We may break it into a two parter. That's kind of on a fence.

Sydnee: He uh, he mentions that prevention is better than cure. If you can prevent, prevent.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: That you're a member of society. You have obligations to society, as well. And yeah, the same kind of stuff. Um, it was updated around the same time period by another doctor. Dr. Louis Weinstein, who also said – and I thought this was a good addition to it as well – "I shall have the highest respect for human life, and remember that it is wrong to terminate

life in certain circumstances, permissible in some, and an act of supreme love in others.”

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: That’s—these are some of the things that have been debated over time in the oath is, `cause what the oath is speaking to are the same issues that are debated, not just in medicine, but in society today.

Justin: Right, it’s trying to solidify an ethical code that is like, by its very nature, sort of in flux. Like, it’s...

Sydnee: Right. And is also variable, depending on the person who is practicing medicine. So, I mean, they’re talking about abortion, which we mentioned in the very first oath. But they’re also talking about...

Justin: Euthanasia, right?

Sydnee: Yes. Physician-assisted suicide. So, all of these things are being kind of rolled into it, and depending on who is writing it and who is interpreting it, it’s different. Which is why you can see where, as I’m gonna get into, not everybody even agrees that we should have an oath nowadays. In this modern world, there are a lot of doctors who are like, “I don’t think this is relevant to me whatsoever.” I’m not saying I’m one of them, but there is an argument that many make that this whole concept is flawed.

The one—I found one called `an oath that bears the name of Hippocrates.’

Justin: That’s a little wordy.

Sydnee: Which I do think actually may have been the one I took. It’s a little more... “I do solemnly swear by what each of us holds most sacred.”

Justin: Very general.

Sydnee: Uh, just about being loyal to medicine, and lead my life, and uprightness and honor. And then the same kind of stuff. I won't hurt people,

I'll try to help people, I will keep my patients' secrets, and I will forever be thought of as a jerk if I don't.

Justin: [laughs] That's what it says right there.

Sydnee: Kind of a very vague, general thing. In the '80s, the AMA, the American Medical Association, introduced a code of ethics. Which basically was supposed to replace all these oaths with like, a set of rules. A set of statements. These are the ethics of being a doctor.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And basically, it was, you should do things that are in the best interest of your patient, that you should respect their rights and of your colleagues, that you should keep learning. Keep studying, 'cause stuff changes. And that you shall, y'know, take care of people and improve your community. I mean, it's very, like... we don't need a sacred oath for this. These are just the things that—

Justin: The things that you do.

Sydnee: These are the job requirements, y'know?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Which should have taken care of it. That's what a lot of people argued. It's funny, 'cause if you look at like, in the '80s, a pretty small percentage of medical schools were taking an oath at graduation.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: Yeah. Like, a lot of doctors who graduated back then weren't... that just wasn't part of the ceremony. By the year 2000, almost 100% of US medical schools were taking an oath.

Justin: That's so interesting.

Sydnee: There was a huge shift in that time. Now, what oath were they taking? It varies. A lot of people were taking some version of that original Hippocratic oath. Probably that one I mentioned that I think is the one I took, 'an oath that bears the name Hippocrates.' Some people are using the Louis Lasagna oath. That one was very popular.

There are other oaths as well. The oath of Maimonides is one that I found was taken a lot by pharmacists, but also by some medical schools. He was a medieval Jewish philosopher who was a preeminent Torah scholar as well, and wrote about a lot of different things – medical, legal, ethical, religious, lots of different writings.

And there is an oath that... it's a little shorter and to the point, and it's a lot more calling to a higher power. It's a lot more religiously focused. But the same idea, and a beautiful oath that you can take in some medical schools as well. Again, about... y'know, taking care of people and doing good and not doing it for your own glory, but doing it for the right reasons and that kind of... that kind of thing.

Although, similarly to the oath of Hippocrates, it's questioned whether Maimonides actually wrote it. It's the same idea. You get these... I hope that if anybody ever, like, gives me an oath that I didn't write... I can't imagine that would happen, but I hope if someday there's like, the Sydnee oath, the oath of Sydnee, and it's something that like, I didn't actually write, but I'm given credit for it throughout all of human history... I hope it has good stuff in it.

Justin: Yeah. You'd think it would at least get—capture your essence.

Sydnee: I hope so. I hope it's like... maybe—you can even like, say what other people said, and just attribute it to me, as long as it's good stuff.

Justin: Yeah, it's cool, smart stuff.

Sydnee: Be excellent to each other. Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Um, but uh, in 2019, an updated oath was offered up there in conjunction with the World Health Organization, with the thought that we need a new oath. Which is interesting, 'cause as I said, there are many who think we don't even need an oath at all. But the new oath adds the line, "I will protect the environment which sustains us in the knowledge that the continuing health of ourselves and our societies is dependent on a healthy planet."

Justin: Oh wow.

Sydnee: So, an updated oath that calls to our personal... I guess, even as physic—again, I would say that if I, as a physician, can stop climate change, I am so down for that.

Justin: Yeah, way into it.

Sydnee: Um, but it's interesting, because as humans, we're all called to do that, I think.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: It's all of our responsibility. It's interesting that you would put it directly into the oath that a medical student would take.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Which is why I think you get a lot of controversy around it today. Do we need an oath? Is there any reason? What happens if you violate the oath?

Justin: Nothing.

Sydnee: I mean, unless you committed malpractice or like, did a crime...

Justin: And you don't really need to take an oath to follow the laws, 'cause the laws just kind of... force you to follow them.

Sydnee: Right. You have to.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, by the way, there's a different oath—I didn't know this. Osteopathic physicians take a different oath. The osteopathic oath, which is similar. Again, very similar, except it specifically says, like, you'll uh, develop the principles of osteopathy. So like, it specifically mentions osteopathy.

And there are different oaths throughout the world. There's a Buddhist medical doctors oath, the Vejjavatapada. The Seventeen Rules of Enjuin, which was a Japanese traditional oath for Japanese medical students to take. There's the oath of Asaph, which is a code of conduct for Jewish physicians. Um, there's a nursing code.

Justin: Oh!

Sydnee: The Nightingale Pledge. It's, again, been updated over the years, but originally from Florence Nightingale. Uh, do we need one?

Justin: I don't...

Sydnee: Do we need an oath? I mean, that's the question, right?

Justin: Ehh, I would... well, it's nice. I think it's nice to take an oath. It's a nice sort of like... y'know, thing that says "I'm a doctor now." It's part of like the—the—y'know, the ceremony.

Sydnee: It is a very meaningful moment in the ceremony. Even though, I say that, but I don't remember which one I took. [laughs]

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I remember that there was a moment where they say, "It is now time to take the Hippocratic oath." I remember, like, feeling the gravity of what I was taking on in that moment.

Justin: I think anything that imbues medical students, y'know, soon to be doctors, with the sense of gravity of what they're doing, I think is a positive. Um, I do have a question for you, Sydnee.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: We talked about this in this entire episode. I didn't hear you say, "First, do no harm." Is that like... I know that the spirit of that has been in some of them, but is that not part of the Hippocratic oath?

Sydnee: It is not. That was a great question. I'm glad you brought it up, 'cause that was one thing I meant to address. It's not part of the oath. It is commonly—it's a common misconception. In another of his writings, Hippocrates wrote, "First, do no harm." That the primary—well, the way he wrote it was, "The primary tenants of a physician are to do no harm and do good." So, non-maleficence and benevolence, which are two of the core medical ethics that we're taught. Do no harm and do good things.

But, it is not in the oath. The oath speaks to that, I think, for sure. But when people say it's from the Hippocratic oath, that's actually not true.

Justin: Interesting!

Sydnee: Primum non nocere is not in there.

Justin: Look at that. Another wrinkle for your noggin.

Sydnee: Yeah. But uh, yeah, so that's the question today. A lot of doctors will argue that it's sort of redundant. If you practice good medicine, then you will, by default, follow the tenants of the oath. And so, why are—

Justin: I just can't think of a compelling argument against it, though.

Sydnee: I mean, I don't—for me, it's the same idea as like, an equal rights amendment. People will argue, "Well, we don't need it, it's redundant." Well... I would say that we do need it, on one hand, from a very like,

practical, like... just because something is written into law doesn't mean it is always true.

Um, anything that reminds us and re-solidifies the concept that humans are humans and should be treated as such is important. And likewise, anything that reminds physicians that the stuff you're doing is, um, the... the power that you have, the skills that you've learned, the knowledge that you have, can be used for great good, but also can be used, and has been used throughout history, for terrible evil. And so, you should—you should use that knowledge with the utmost respect and humility, and you should treat other humans with the utmost respect and humility.

I don't think there's anything wrong with that, because when they say, like, "I will not play at God." That sounds like a joke, like a stereotype, like, oh, you know how doctors are. They're playing God. Whatever. It's really important, the knowledge that you have about other people's bodies, based on your ability to interpret information because of the stuff you were taught... it gives you a knowledge and a power that the person sitting across from you might not have. And you should constantly be aware of that, and constantly be seeking to balance that out by giving that information, teaching people, helping people, humbling yourself to other people.

I do think that there is something about it that is... that calls to more than just a job. I don't know. That's my opinion. I know anything can go beyond being what it is as a job to something greater. But I think that, as a physician, you have to understand that and respect it, or otherwise, you'll hurt people. Or you just—you might not hurt people, you won't do a very good job.

Justin: Uh, we will now take the Sawbones oath. I will, to the best of my ability, rate, review, and subscribe to the podcast.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Sawbones, I recognize that all ratings and reviews and subscriptions help out this podcast, which is free. We've got a new, uh, Sawbones merchandise. If you head on over to McElroyMerch.com, or

McElroy.family and click on the merch link, you're gonna find, uh, this new... first off, we got a pro-vax pin, designed by Megan Kott. All the proceeds from that are gonna go to the Immunization Action Coalition. Immunization Action Coalition. There we go. Got it.

That's a group that's helping to... well, just what it says. Try to remind people that vaccines are great.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Spread correct information about the importance of vaccines.

Justin: Yes. That is a wonderful group, and we are so happy to support them with, uh, we did with our vaccine shirts, which are still available, and the pro-vax pin. We've also got a 'Cure-Alls Cure Nothing' t-shirt now that is available in the store, and you can go get it right this second. I think it's really cool. What else?

Thanks to the Taxpayers for the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program. And thanks to you for listening.

Sydnee: Thank you.

Justin: Until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

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

[theme music plays]

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[ocean sounds]

Speaker 1: Ahh, there's nothing quite like sailing the calm, international waters on my ship, the SS Biopic.

[ship horns]

Speaker 2: Avast, it's actually pronounced bio-pick!

Speaker 1: No, you dingus! It's biopic!

Speaker 2: Who the hell says that? It's bio-pick.

Speaker 1: It's the words for biography and picture!

Speaker 2: If you—

[ship horn]

Dave: Alright, that is enough! Ahoy, I'm Dave Holmes. I'm the host of the newly rebooted podcast, formerly known as International Waters. Designed to resolve petty, but persistent arguments like this. How? By pitting two teams of opinionated comedians against each other with trivia and improv games, of course! Winner takes home the right to be right.

Speaker 1: What podcast be this?

Dave: It's called Troubled Waters, where we disagree to disagree!