

Sawbones 254: The Herpes-Centric Thanksgiving Special

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Intro (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.

[theme music plays]

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

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Uh, happy s—happy, uh, Thanksgiving, Sydnee.

Sydnee: Why, thank you, Justin.

Justin: Ho ho ho.

Sydnee: It—

Justin: He's just around the corner!

Sydnee: That's really—that's really it for Thanksgiving.

Justin: For me?

Sydnee: It's just a prelude to...

Justin: For me, it don't get better than seein' that... that jolly—that jolly old fella on the sleigh at the end of the—

Sydnee: Ohh, at the Macy's—

Justin: —the department store parade.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: That's when the season is here, folks.

Sydnee: Did you say "department store parade," like we're not allowed to say Macy's?

Justin: Yeah—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —no, I was just trying to, like—I was trying to heighten the absurdity of Christmas season being rung in by a department store chain.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Justin: By saying... department store.

Sydnee: Oh, okay.

Justin: I guess it didn't work.

Sydnee: I thought it was sort of like in Archie Comics when they, like, have the names of celebrities, but they're off by, like, one letter.

Justin: If you have to ask yourself if I am or am not referencing Archie Comics... you are usually gonna be a lot safer going with the "nay" on that. But, I mean, it's always possible.

Sydnee: It'll be like, "Bruce Springstone." [laughs]

Justin: Okay. You're—you've kind of pivoted this into an opportunity to talk about Archie's, which I—it's fine. I celebrate that.

Sydnee: I don't wanna talk about Archie's.

Justin: Uh-huh.

Sydnee: I mean, I do, but that's not—

Justin: You do, of course you do.

Sydnee: —not for this show. Uh, I wanna talk about herpes.

[pauses]

Justin: Okay—this is our Val—this is our, uh—our Thanksgiving special, huh?

Sydnee: Yes. Herpes.

Justin: [uncertainly] Okay?

Sydnee: Herpes simples—herpes simplex virus, HSV.

Justin: Okay. Why, uh, herpes?

Sydnee: Here's the thing. Uh, first of all, a lot of people want us to talk about herpes. Um, thank you to Kevin and Ransom and Christine and Bradley for suggesting something very searchable, HSV. I think a lot of other people have suggested cold sores, but that's—that's a lot. That would've been a whole episode of thanking everybody, and also to search "cold sores" in the email—it just was harder.

Anyway—so, thank you everybody who's recommended this topic. I don't know why we haven't covered it! It's very—it's a very prevalent viral infection, and I don't know why we haven't gotten to it yet.

Justin: Uh, yeah. I mean, I feel like there's—some people think it's kind of, uh... yucky. To talk about.

Sydnee: There is! There's a lot of stigma when it comes to herpes. I was thinking about that episode of *Friends* where Joey does the bus ads and the subway ads for getting tested for sexually transmitted infections. You know, as most do.

Justin: If you are ever wondering whether or not I remember a specific *Friends* episode—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: —the answer to that is usually gonna be "nay."

Sydnee: Anyway, herpes viruses are incredibly common. HSV is so common that if you're an adult and you're listening to this podcast, you probably carry some type of HSV.

Justin: Uh... I don't *think* I do? But—

Sydnee: You probably do!

Justin: —I probably do, apparently.

Sydnee: We probably—the majority of adults probably do. I say "probably" because we don't test people for it, and I'll get into why, but herpes is horribly stigmatized, and this Thanksgiving, I want to give you the information to empower you to go spend this joyous time with your friends and family destigmatizing herpes.

Justin: This is the Thanksgiving that you destigmatize herpes.

Sydnee: That's right.

Justin: You've waited long enough.

Sydnee: Uh, herpes viruses are very common among animal species. It's interesting, humans get two types. We're the lucky ones.

Justin: [simultaneously] Oh, lucky us! [laughs]

Sydnee: Most—most don't. Uh, generally speaking, when I'm talking about herpes—

Justin: [coughs]

Sydnee: —you're probably thinking of one of two types of infections, 'cause I'm sticking to HSV, herpes simplex viruses. I'm not gonna get into, like, shingles and zoster. I'm really sticking to the two things you would think of, which are either cold sores—so, oral herpes, which generally are caused by HSV-1, and then genital herpes, which are generally caused by HSV-2, although either can cause either. Both can do both.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But generally, you see HSV-1 in the mouth and HSV-2 in the genitals. Generally.

Uh, humans got HSV-1 before we evolved into humans.

Justin: Wow. Really?

Sydnee: Like, they infected one of our—

Justin: It is older than us.

Sydnee: —chimpanzee predecessors, evolutionary predecessors. Uh, we got HSV-2, though, after we were already human. Like, after we had evolved into—to homo erectus, at least.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, from, like, a primate predecessor.

Justin: Still extremely old.

Sydnee: But think about that for a second. Where is your mind going? There was a homo erectus who get genital herpes from a Plio-Pleistocene hominin, Paranthropus boisei, also known as Nutcracker Man.

[pauses]

Justin: [laughs loudly] You look so pleased with yourself right now.

Sydnee: I was. Nutcracker—it's 'cause—I guess he had these, like, big, flat teeth that were good for cracking nuts.

Justin: Uh-huh?

Sydnee: But Nutcracker Man gave—

Justin: But he's so much more multi-leveled than that, Syd.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: He's got a lot to offer. Don't stop at the teeth, folks. That's as far as a lot of people see.

Sydnee: He gave a homo erectus genital herpes.

Justin: [inhales] Okay.

Sydnee: And that's how it got into humans.

Justin: I cel—can I say that? I celebrate that. I celebrate their right to have whatever kind of loving relationship they want to, unlike my wife, who's ready to cast scorn their way.

Sydnee: I'm not, because there—it is quite possible that homo erectus just ate Nutcracker Man, and that's how he got herpes from him.

Justin: I'm sorry, Nutcracker Man, for all the disparaging things—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: —that we've said, and for eating you.

Sydnee: I'm—I—yeah.

Justin: Sorry my great-grandfather ate Nutcracker Man.

Sydnee: I'd say it goes a little further back. Homo erectus.

Justin: [simultaneously] My great-great-grandfather.

Sydnee: Little further. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Great-great-great.

Sydnee: Uh, many people are infected with HSV, as I've said. And for the most part, it causes... what really—like, from a purely medical perspective—and this is not getting into the stigma or the psychological effects of getting a sexually

transmitted infection—just, like, purely medically speaking, the actual damage it does to the human body is not—I mean, it's not that severe.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: You get a cold sore. It goes away. Maybe another one comes back. You get some sores on your genitals, then they go away. So as far as, like, physical damage to the human body, it's a fairly benign infection, right?

Justin: I—I'll take your word for it, yes.

Sydnee: A lot of people carry it around and don't know they have it, so in that way, it's very benign. You might be carrying herpes and have no clue. So, for you, as a physical effect on your body, it's not—it's not the worst-case scenario, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Now, it can do some things—I say this to differentiate it from some of the more serious things that this virus *can* do. It can cause things like encephalitis, like, an inflammation of the brain, which is obviously a much bigger problem.

It can cause infections in newborns, which can be very serious. It can cause some infections in your eyes. Um, you can get some other things on other parts of your body. There's one that I always like to talk about: herpes gladiatorum.

Justin: Gladiatorum.

Sydnee: I like the name.

Justin: Have we talked about that before? It seems like we have.

Sydnee: Maybe. It's named for wrestlers.

Justin: Oh!

Sydnee: Gladiatorum.

Justin: Oh, okay, got it.

Sydnee: It's named for wrestlers—'cause it—it's also called "wrestlers' herpes" or "mat herpes."

Justin: [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: Or "scrum pox," which is a horrible name.

Justin: That's the worst word you've ever said.

Sydnee: You can get in on—you can get it other places on your trunk from, like, contact with wrestlers or, you know—

Justin: [holding back laughter] Any wrestlers, pretty much?

Sydnee: Well not, like, any—like, wrestlers who have herpes.

Justin: Pretty much any wrestler who you wrestle with—

Sydnee: Not any wrestlers. There's also one called herpetic whitlow, which is on the fingers. Just in case you're curious.

Like I said, the most common manifestation are the sores on your mouth or the sores on your genitals, and some—and as far as the presentation, there's a huge variety. Some people carry it around and don't really know they have it, 'cause they just—either their outbreak, the first one was so minimal they didn't even notice, or they got it, they didn't really know what it was, it went away and never had another one.

Whereas other people might have multiple, you know, instances of sores throughout their life. It just depends. It varies from person to person.

Um, it is much more severe if you are in some way immuno-compromised.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: So if your immune system cannot respond as most do to an infection, you could get a much more severe infection. It is an ancient disease. The word "herpes" comes from the Greek "to creep," because the sores tend to creep.

And when we go back to, like, Hippocrates writing about herpes, it's important to note that he was talking about probably what we know as HSV, but he was also probably talking about shingles, zoster. He was also probably talking about chicken pox. He was also probably talking about a variety of other skin conditions, viral or non-viral, that just kind of look similar.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So it's—it's hard to differentiate, if we look at ancient texts—like everybody always likes to talk about, Pliny the Elder had some wild ideas about shingles and zoster and about what would happen if the infection wrapped around your whole body, and you would die, and it would be terrible, and—anyway, he was probably talking about a different thing.

So, it all looked the same. They used the same word, "herpes," because it was a creeping skin infection, but... they weren't necessarily always discussing HSV.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, Roman emperor Tiberius tried to stop the spread of herpes. He at least identified that somehow it was something that was communicable, and specifically he was probably focused on cold sores, 'cause those are—I mean, those are easily visible, right? That was probably the reason they were the most—

Justin: Hot topic.

Sydnee: Yeah, I mean, you could look at a potential, uh, kissing partner and see cold sores.

[pauses]

Justin: Whenever I'm on a first date, I always like to address them as "potential kissing partner."

Sydnee: [laughs] I'm just saying, you have a potential kissing partner—

Justin: No, it's—it's a sexy way of sayin' it. I'm down.

Sydnee: So he banned public kissing.

Justin: Oh, no!

Sydnee: To try to stop—stop the spread.

Justin: I'm gonna move. Move out of this stupid country.

Sydnee: Uh, there weren't a lot of—I mean, there were a lot of probably herbal-type cures and things like that. I mean, it's important to remember—cold sores, then as now, go away. They run their course, right? Like, you get a cold sore, it hurts, and it goes away. And it might come back later, but it goes away on its own, so people probably put stuff on it in the meantime—

Justin: Are they usually triggered by trauma?

Sydnee: They can be. Stress or trauma or illness or things like that bring them out.

Justin: I feel like any time I bite my lip, I just know I'm gonna get one there. It always turns into one. It's the worst.

Sydnee: And you're probably—it is important to know, there's the herpes virus-induced ulcers that are, you know, that we're talking about. There's also aphthous ulcers in the mouth, which aren't necessarily the same thing but can result—just ulcers that can result from trauma, like biting the inside of your lip or your tongue—

Justin: Maybe it's just those, though, because I've never got one on the outside of my mouth.

Sydnee: Yeah. Yeah, same here. So...

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: But, uh—but also, like, I always know if I eat some really acidic things, drink some acidic things, that'll happen. Or when I'm sick.

Um, but these same things can bring out herpes. Uh, they used to consider treating them with hot irons—

Justin: [groans]

Sydnee: —to cauterize the sores.

Justin: Ugh, that's brutal.

Sydnee: Not a popular treatment, though, because... you know. They just go away, and that would hurt.

Justin: Yeah. I'm good.

Sydnee: And they already hurt, and now that would hurt more. Um, a lot of people wrote about herpes. Everybody always likes to mention that Shakespeare wrote about herpes.

Justin: Well, what'd he say?

Sydnee: Uh, in *Romeo and Juliet*, when he talks about, uh, "O'er ladies lips, who straight on kisses dream, which oft the angry Mab with blisters plague, because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are."

Justin: That's nice—Syd, you did a really good job of respecting the iambs and the pentameter in that—in that read.

Sydnee: Thank you. [holding back laughter] Thank you.

Justin: Great job.

Sydnee: Anyway.

Justin: [crosstalk] the verse.

Sydnee: I—I put that in there purely because everybody who likes to talk about the history of herpes seems to like to mention that Shakespeare wrote about it, so... I don't know if that makes it... cooler? Trendier? It's like, "Listen. I am on-trend. Shakespeare wrote about this."

Uh, we figured out in the late 1800s and the early 1900s that herpes sores were distinct from all these other creeping infections.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And that they were caused by a virus, and that it was infectious, and eventually that there were two separate types, and I don't wanna get into that too much, because here's the truth: uh... it wasn't that big a deal, for a long time!

Justin: We just—we had—listen. [holding back laughter] There are—we are dying for so many—[wheezes] reasons!

Sydnee: It wasn't that big a deal! And so certainly, like, one of the herbal cures I saw, like, tansy was a common thing to put on it. But no—I mean, like, a lot of people weren't goin' for the hot irons, because... who cares?! Everybody has 'em. They're super common. It goes away. We can live with it. That was really the—the—the idea.

Um, in the realm—I was trying to find weird herpes cures, and there really aren't a lot that are easy to research, because they were so often overlapped with other skin infections.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: [holding back laughter] Uh, the most common one I found was attributed to Dr. Oz. So, I found the clip from Dr. Oz to look for a weird—

Justin: Dr. Oz. Welcome back to the show, Droz, by the way.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: What a treat. Always a pleasure to have you here.

Sydnee: Thank—thank you for joining us. I wouldn't have believed this if I hadn't seen the clip myself.

He was talking with two other, uh—he was talking with two guests on the show to, um, women who have herpes, and he had them both put on headbands that had, like, different triggers of herpes. So, like, getting back to—one said "stress," one said "illness—" and they formed a herpes train.

Justin: [reluctantly] Uh-huh?

Sydnee: And they made a—like, a choo choo train around the... stage.

Justin: Folks, he's got an hour to fill every day. You deal with that pressure and let me know how you handle it.

Sydnee: Anyway, some stuff that he recommends, which is probably in line with a lot of the stuff throughout history that has been recommended, is, like, seep a teabag in hot water—steep a teabag. Not seep, steep [holding back laughter] a teabag in hot water and then put it on there, and it'll dry it out.

People always love to dry things out. I've found that. That's always an alternative medicine thing. "It'll dry it out." Okay? Thanks.

Justin: Okay, sure.

Sydnee: That doesn't... whatever. Uh, they say that the tannins will do that. Lemon balm, eat foods rich in lysine, low in arginine—[laughs quietly]

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Eat yogurt.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Um, I looked into—

Justin: "Eat yogurt" is pretty good advice for pretty much all the time.

Sydnee: Sure. I mean, eat yogurt. Like, eat yogurt, that's great, but... I've looked into some of these things, by the way, and as far as I can tell, there was a study done once that suggested that a whole lot of lysine in your body can help, like, suppress the virus somewhat, so it can't—

Justin: What foods are rich in lysine?

Sydnee: Largely, like, meat. And then things like seeds or nuts. Um, and there was—there was, like, some evidence that if you could keep your lysine level in your body at a certain level that perhaps, in some people, it might suppress the virus once you've already gotten it somewhat. But the evidence wasn't strong, and another study said it really doesn't work unless you also limit your arginine, and then it said "Well, never mind, it doesn't work at all."

So... I don't know. Dr. Oz made a train to describe it.

Justin: Thanks, Dr. Oz.

Sydnee: You can watch that if you—

Justin: You did it again.

Sydnee: —if you feel so inclined. For centuries, though, herpes was something we didn't really get too troubled over. Even as we started to really care about sexually transmitted infections, which you can really trace back to, like, the World Wars. World War I, a lot of soldiers went away and then came back with what were called at the time "social diseases."

Justin: Oh. How polite.

Sydnee: "Social diseases." And that became—that kind of led to this public panic. Like, this idea that that was gonna happen any time you had sex, and at the time, let's be honest, "not with your monogamous married partner" was kind of the implication.

And so there were all these sexually transmitted infection awareness campaigns, but even then, they weren't talking about herpes. The itch down there was not that big a deal. It was really just syphilis, gonorrhea—those were the things—um, chancroid—those were the things people were really concerned about.

It didn't become a problem until the 70s.

Justin: What happened in the 70s?

Sydnee: I'm gonna tell you, Justin—

Justin: [sighs]

Sydnee: —but first, let's head to the billing department.

Justin: You'd think I'd see 'em comin'. Let's go!

[theme music plays]

Justin: Folks, our first sponsor this week is MeUndies. It's an underwear company, as you've probably guessed from the title, that makes just about—not just about, I'll say it—the best darn underwear... on the planet.

Sydnee: They're all we wear.

Justin: They're all we wear—well, I mean, they're the only underwear we wear. We wear more than MeUndies—

Sydnee: Oh yeah, that's true. I—

Justin: —especially these cold—

Sydnee: —I wear other clothes over the underwear.

Justin: —these cold days. Uh, luckily you—you, uh, have to wear less non-MeUndies garments, because MeUndies is beyond just making great undies. Uh, also, will take their fabric—it's called micromodal, it's three times softer than cotton—and they have made them into lounge pants and onesies as well. Folks...

Sydnee: The pants are so comfortable.

Justin: The pants are like wearing a daydream.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: You slip 'em on and it's like, "I'm—I'm good for the day."

Sydnee: [holding back laughter] Now Justin and I wear our matching lounge pants around the house to freak our children out.

Justin: That's *our* lives.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Uh, they got four different cuts of underwear, all of which are available in classic colors all the way over to adventurous prints, like, uh—you know the one I

like? I like the one that is just jack-o'-lanterns, 'cause in these post-Halloween days, it can seem so far away, and it's a nice reminder that Halloween is always just around the corner.

Sydnee: Well...

Justin: Uh—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —MeUndies has a great offer for our listeners, for any first time purchasers, when you purchase any MeUndies, you get 15% off and free shipping. Make a big order, folks. Really make that count, 'cause you're gonna want a lot of 'em.

Uh, to get your first... pair, with free shipping and a 100% satisfaction guarantee—

Sydnee: And 15% off!

Justin: —that's right! Go to meundies.com/sawbones. That's meundies.com/sawbones.

We're also sponsored this week by Boll and Branch. Uh, you know what you're gonna have a lot of—you're about to spend some time with family. There's gonna be a lot of, uh—I don't know your family, but I imagine there might be some controversial opinions. Some hot takes vis a vis the world in which we live—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: —but there is one common ground you can use to unite everyone. One: you can ask 'em if they knew that Benjamin Franklin wanted the turkey to be the official bird of America.

Sydnee: People love that.

Justin: People love that.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's a great way of defusing any—*any* situation at Thanksgiving. After that, you can talk about sleep! We all love it. None of us are getting enough of it, and, uh, we could always do it just a little bit better, and Boll and Branch is here to help you do that.

Everything they make, from bedding to blankets, is made from pure, 100% organic cotton, which means they start out really soft and get softer over time.

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Shipping is free. You can try 'em for 30 nights, and if you don't love 'em, you send 'em back for a refund.

To get you started right now, our listeners can get \$50 off your first set of sheets at bollandbranch.com, promo code "sawbones." That's bollandbranch.com today for \$50 off your first set of sheets. B-O-L-L and branch.com, promo code "sawbones."

Justin: So Syd, uh, to hear you tell it... everybody was crazy about herpes. They loved the stuff. And then around the 70s, that started to take a turn.

Sydnee: Well, I didn't say everybody was *crazy* about it. It just wasn't—it was kind of one of those things, like, a lot of people got cold sores and people— a lot of people were probably getting, you know, sores on their genitals, and they just weren't—I mean... whatever. They weren't talking about it.

Justin: Just weren't makin' a federal case out of it.

Sydnee: Right. [laughs quietly] People weren't seeking a lot of treatment for it, is the truth.

Justin: [coughs]

Sydnee: Um, in the 70s, though, a few different things happened that changed that. First, the first big deal drug to treat herpes was released. The first one that, um, didn't have a lot of horrible side effects and was targeted at herpes, at HSV.

It was released by Burroughs Wellcome & Company, which I think is now GlaxoSmithCline, I believe. But Zovirax or acyclovir, as you probably have heard it now.

Justin: [robot voice] Zovirax. I'm here to cure your herpes.

Sydnee: [laughs] That's—well, that's—

Justin: [robot voice] Your Earth herpes.

Sydnee: I don't think they... I don't think the commercial was like that, but I wish it was.

Justin: It'd be good.

Sydnee: It would've been a good commercial. But it was originally—like, the idea—because we had antibiotics, right? Like, this is—by this time in history, we already have penicillin and all of the antibiotics that came thereafter—well, quite a few of them by this point.

Um, and we knew we could treat and cure bacterial infections. The next big landmark was, "Can we treat and cure viral infections the way we do bacterial?"

Viruses are harder, which is why, as you know, we don't have a lot of antivirals, right? I mean, think about it. When you come in and we say "You got a virus," we don't give you anything for it, because we don't have anything that'll help with that. Most of the time they're self-limited and it's not a big deal anyway.

Well, there are, as I mentioned, life-threatening manifestations of the herpes virus in certain patients under certain conditions, and so we did need drugs to treat that.

But the idea, as they introduced acyclovir among their marketing team was that "That's not enough, 'cause those life-threatening infections are not very common. And while that certainly is a good use for our drug, uh... we wanna sell it to more people. We've put in all this time and effort and research and development to make this drug, and we wanna make a ton of money off it. But most people just don't care enough about herpes to bother to treat it, and certainly not to pay for a brand new antiviral medication," right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And this is supported by the fact that as late as 1975, there was a study done. Psychological morbidity in a clinic for sexually transmitted disease.

So, this is—I kinda mentioned earlier that from, like, a purely physical, like, cellular destruction standpoint, most herpes is not that big a deal.

Justin: Not a big deal.

Sydnee: But from a psychological standpoint now, we would say it's a *huge* deal for a lot of patients. Well, as of 1975 when they did a study on the specific psychological effects of getting an STI, they don't even mention herpes.

Justin: So it's like nobody cares.

Sydnee: Because nobody cared! They didn't—it wasn't even included in the study, because the idea that people would be suffering a psychological, you know, some sort of illness from a herpes infection was just unheard of! Nobody would care! Why would we?

So they needed a strategy. How do we get people to care about herpes?

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: So they launched a disease awareness campaign.

Justin: Aww, you're k—ugh!

Sydnee: No.

Justin: I should've seen this coming.

Sydnee: They were emphasizing the importance of treating genital herpes specifically, so they didn't focus on cold sores, because... I mean, for one, you can see that a lot of people have 'em, so it was hard to stigmatize cold sores.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Even if a lot of people have genital herpes, you're not seeing that on the street on a regular basis.

Justin: It's hard to make that a secret shame.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So they—so they started focusing on the idea—first of all, they started using terminology like, um, "incurable."

"[serious tone] This is incurable."

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: "[dramatic tone] You're going to get herpes having sex, and it's *never* going to be cured."

And that, like—now, when I say that—

Justin: "[dramatic tone] A burden you'll carry around your entire life."

Sydnee: And that was a radical idea to introduce into the public at the time, because people really didn't feel that way about herpes. And so all of a sudden they painted genital herpes as this huge deal that you had to manage, because not only were *you* gonna have it forever, "[dramatic tone] You're gonna give it to—someday, your poor, blushing bride—

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: "[dramatic tone] you're gonna give her herpes. And how bad will you feel—" and so they—really, they started to create this idea that herpes was something that had to be treated, had to be managed, you had to go see a doctor for instantly, and you had to deal with this disease burden the rest of your life!

So they started organizing special teaching for doctors. I don't know if there was food. I don't know if there were... golfing outings. I don't know if there were free box seats to sporting events, but my experience in the medical community... [laughs quietly] leads me to believe there probably was.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: There were, at the very least, nice cups and pens, right? So they started organizing all these teaching sessions for doctors. They organized support groups. This wasn't—there weren't—I mean, why would there have been a support group? Nobody was—

Justin: For people with herpes?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: Support groups for people with herpes, so that they could get to—and they started using words like "sufferers" and "victims."

Uh, around this same time—and this wasn't the doing of the pharmaceutical company, this was just the atmosphere in the US in general—conservatives began to use HSV as an example of the negative consequences of the sexual revolution.

So, "Listen. I know all you hippies think you're havin' such a good time with your free love and your sex, but guess what? Now y'all got herpes, and it's terrible."

Justin: [laughs] Burn.

Sydnee: So in July of 1980, Time Magazine published a cover article titled *Herpes: The New Sexual Leprosy*.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And they talked about things like—there was one case where a man contracted herpes after he, quote, "succumbed to the temptation of a local lady" while he was abroad.

Justin: So gross.

Sydnee: In Asia. They ran another cover story in 1982 calling herpes *The New Scarlet Letter*.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: And they talked about herpes as altering sexual rights in America, and changing courtship patterns, and—"it is a numbing blow to the one-night stand."

This is the way they talked about—

Justin: Just completely...

Sydnee: Yeah! I mean, this is, I would say—I am not a journalist. I would say this is biased journalism.

[pauses]

Justin: Yeah. Uh, I mean, it obviously is, uh... [clears throat] well, it's not biased journalism. I think that there's a, uh, real vulnerability—I used to cover health from time to time, 'cause we didn't have, like, a health reporter at one of the newspapers I worked at. And there's a real vulnerability in the press when you have a press that—and this is why it's so important to support your local press. Uh, when you don't have people who are well-educated about this sort of thing, then people will buy whatever line you feed them.

If you're a doctor and you come to a reporter and say "Hey, this is a health thing that I know about and you don't." Pretty—you know, obviously you should be vetting that stuff, but, you know, it's easy to get roped in by stuff like that.

Sydnee: I see that stuff all the time. I see reports where doctors are being quoted, and I know, because I... I—

Justin: You know.

Sydnee: —believe in science and evidence-based medicine, that what they're saying is *totally* off the charts from what the majority of medical professionals believe, but they're a doctor, so they're getting quoted.

Um, but this—this article painted herpes as the scourge of... basically people that you didn't wanna be. People who cheated on their partners, people who [dramatic tone] were swingers. [gasp] Swingers!

Justin: [simultaneously] Swingers.

Sydnee: Um, that it was something that, uh, you could use to scare your husbands into faithfulness. So, "Women, lecture your husbands about herpes."

Justin: So they don't bring home herpes to you.

Sydnee: So they don't bring home herpes to you. And, like, a scare tactic. And "Ladies, if you get herpes, your husbands will leave you. Your first outbreak, your husbands are gonna leave you, so... don't have sex."

Um, so they basically were using this as a way to say, "Listen. All that—all that sex was fun and stuff, but we're done. It's the 80s. No more sex." [laughs quietly]

Justin: "Listen. There are other very good reasons why we should be telling you this, and we're gonna find out about them here in, like... a few years. W—this is correct information we're giving you, *not* for reasons we're telling about them."

Sydnee: Listen, I don't think "no more sex" is correct information. I think "use proper protection" is correct information.

Justin: Okay, fair, yes, fine.

[pauses]

Sydnee: Are you—[laughs] I didn't—I didn't know you were an abstinence-only fan over here.

Justin: I'm not an abstinence-only fan! I'm just saying that, like, there are repercussions of, like, unprotected sex that were not being dealt with at this time period that—

Sydnee: No.

Justin: —okay, herpes is not the *right* reason to deal with it, but I'm not saying it was, like, the worst advice to, like, use protection!

Sydnee: I think—I think that—well, I think we're... the problem is that it's wrapped into—this was not doctors and medical professionals advocating for safe sex so that you could, you know, reduce the spread of sexually transmitted infections and prevent an unwanted pregnancy and all that.

It was people who believed sex was bad, morally bad.

Justin: I get it, I get it.

Sydnee: Lecturing America on their bad sex that they're having. That—I think that's my problem. It's not a moral thing. It's a medical thing.

Either way, in 1983, there was a made-for-TV movie called *Intimate Agony...* about herpes. *Intimate Agony*. Uh, there were articles published in Reader's Digest—not just Time, and US News, and they called—again, they talked about this awful herpes wave that was sweeping the country, and it was the repercussions of our promiscuity. We were reaping the benefits of our... sexual harvest. With herpes.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And the result of all this—which, by the way, there's a name for this.

Justin: Mm-hmm?

Sydnee: Disease-mongering.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: That's what this is called, and it is largely believed that the reason we have a stigma against herpes today is because of the disease-mongering that you can somewhat lay at the foot of the pharmaceutical companies. They had to find a market for their drug.

But also, I mean... prominent figures in the country at large.

Justin: The usual. [holding back laughter] The usual suspects.

Sydnee: Yeah. Uh, to make the stigma attach to the diagnosis. And then, as a result, patients began to seek treatment.

Um, you know, though, as I mentioned—and I've been very careful to differentiate—while the physical effects of herpes, for most patients, are fairly benign—like, a lot of people are carriers and don't even know they have it, so

their physical effects are zero—the psychological effects of getting this diagnosis now can be a lot more devastating.

Um, there was a study in The New England Journal that said, uh, "The psychological effects are far more severe than the physical consequences for many patients, and shock, anger, guilt, low self-esteem, fear of transmitting the infection, impaired sexual function, can follow."

It can lead to social withdrawal and isolation, and especially in young people, because they're given this diagnosis and then told that it is *incurable*, so you have this the rest of your life, and you have to tell every sexual partner, and they're not gonna like you, because you have herpes now.

Justin: But—

Sydnee: Which, I should be clear, you should always disclose your sexual history to a potential partner—

Justin: Yeah, of course.

Sydnee: —before engaging in sexual intercourse, or any other sexual behavior. But not so that they'll know what a dirty person you are.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So that you can both enter into an honest, open sexual relationship.

By 2007, herpes was ranked the second most stigmatized STI after HIV.

Justin: Phew.

Sydnee: Um, it isn't part—by the way, this is a common question. Why isn't it part of a standard screen for sexually transmitted infections? Because a lot of people believe—advocates believe that if we started screening everybody for herpes when we screen them for things like gonorrhea or chlamydia or syphilis or HIV or hepatitis, that we could reduce the stigma, because then we would see that, it's estimated, maybe as many as [holding back laughter] 90% of adults have HSV.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And if—

Justin: You're weird if you don't have it.

Sydnee: Right. So, if we knew that everybody had it, then there wouldn't be a stigma, and so, problem solved. The problem is—there are several. One is very practical: it's expensive. It's an expensive test to run, and so to make it part of a routine screen for sexually transmitted infections would make those screens incredibly expensive. And the nice thing is, there are a lot of places you can go and get those screens for free, and I don't—you know, I think most of us would agree, we don't want that to stop. You know, we want you to be able to get screened for free.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, so that's one problem is the test is so expensive. Another problem is that herpes, as I mentioned, from a lot of, you know—from a lot of doctors' perspective is not... is not the biggest deal in the world, and so it's hard to justify adding this incredibly expensive screen and then giving people this information that might be incredibly psychologically upsetting to them if they're—I mean, they might never have another sore. You might tell somebody "You have the herpes virus," and they *never*, the rest of their life, have any physical manifestation about it.

Justin: [simultaneously] So why even freak out about it, yeah.

Sydnee: So there's that question. Now, of course, they can transmit it, possibly. Not everybody. And I say not everybody because sometimes it's just hard to detect the herpes virus, so the test may be wrong! So we might tell you you don't have it, and we're wrong!

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, and again, it's kind of a moot point. Why test for it when we can just assume, "Are you an adult? Yeah, you probably have it. Don't worry about it."

Justin: "Pass the cranberry."

Sydnee: So... even if you have a positive result, what will we do about it?

Justin: Nothin'!

Sydnee: For a lot of people, we wouldn't. Now, we do have ways to treat herpes, as I mentioned. There's every suppressive therapy, which is you take medicine every single day to try to prevent ever getting any sores, or you can take it just when, you know, sores show up. So if you get a cold sore, if you get some genital lesions, you can take some medication and it'll help 'em go away faster and reduce the pain and everything.

Um, but the stigma is as bad as ever, maybe even getting worse, some studies have shown, over time.

Justin: So, this Thanksgiving... what do we need people to do?

Sydnee: We need you to reduce the stigma!

Justin: Go to your family.

Sydnee: Tell them they all probably have herpes. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Announce it. "I have an announcement to make. [pauses] Debra and I are very much in love... and also everyone in this room has herpes."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [snorts] "And that's fine. And it's fine with me. I have it too. It's fine."

Sydnee: Well, I think—I think that if we're going to—we've talked a lot about both sides. I think this has been interesting, Justin, 'cause you have introduced a lot of the other side of the sexual revolution to this conversation. And I think that it's important that it's from both sides.

If we're going to take good care of ourselves and each other, we have to be open and honest, and the best way to encourage us to be open and honest is to destigmatize the things we're being open and honest about, so that there's no shame. It's just an infection. It's not a judgment on your moral character. Now, and that does not—that is not my way of saying, "So, like, why do you care so much? What's the big deal?"

Obviously you care, because we *do* live in a society that shames people for getting sexually transmitted infections, and that's wrong, and it should stop, but it doesn't take away the fact that this is a big deal for people who are struggling with, like, that knowledge, but shouldn't be.

Justin: Make sure when you tweet this episode... make sure include—you know what? Just include, "Hi, my name is whatever, I probably have herpes, and you should check out the new episode of *Sawbones*." [wheezes]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Then you just link to it.

Sydnee: Most adults have herpes.

Justin: I'll start. My name is Justin McElroy, and I—

Sydnee: [simultaneously] One—one—

Justin: —I probably have herpes, statistically speaking.

Sydnee: Statistically I think HSV-1 is more common than HSV-2—

Justin: Just kind of left me hangin' there. I made a proclamation and you kinda left me hangin'.

Sydnee: I—my name is Sydnee McElroy and I probably have herpes, statistically speaking.

Justin: There we go. See? Stati—that's good!

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: There's a lot of couching of it, but I celebrate that. Uh, folks—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —we hope you have a great Thanksgiving holiday, armed with this mission to destigmatize herpes. Uh, we have certainly enjoyed—I wanna say the we're thankful for you!

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Uh, we're also thankful for everybody who has picked up our book. It's, uh, *Sawbones... The Sawbones Book*, is what it's called, and you can find that at fine retailers everywhere. You know, Christmas is just around the corner, folks, and it makes just a darn great gift, this—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —this book of ours. Uh, and you know, it's not just a physical book! It's also, uh, it's also, um...

Sydnee: Audio book.

Justin: Audio book, thank you, Sydster. And you—that is available, uh, right now, for you to go grab on Audible, from a sponsor of ours, or, uh—or anywhere that you—well, then probably just—

Sydnee: The podcast—

Justin: —probably just Audible.

Sydnee: —the podcast has become a book has become an audio book.

Justin: [rolling Rs] Ouroboros.

Sydnee: The snake is eatin' itself.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Please—please check our book. And don't eat romaine lettuce.

Justin: Don't eat romaine lettuce, apparently!

Sydnee: Yeah. I feel like I should say that, since I'm a physician.

Justin: Yeah, don't eat romaine lettuce.

Sydnee: The CDC has warned you, uh, do not eat any romaine lettuce. So, if anybody tries to serve you that—

Justin: And this is the second time, right?

Sydnee: Yes. [laughs]

Justin: So can we all agree—can we all agree, that probably wraps it up for romaine lettuce. Nobody is so stoked about roma that they're, like—

Sydnee: I *love* romaine lettuce! [laughs]

Justin: Okay, there's one person that stoked about romaine lettuce. Folks, thanks—

Sydnee: I am so bummed, but don't eat it.

Justin: —thanks so much for listening. We'll be back with you next week. Uh, maybe a little bit delayed, 'cause we're gonna be on the road. We'll figure it out. We'll figure something out.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Uh, but until that 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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