

Sawbones 301: Taint Tanning and Heliotherapy

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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. I'm very—I'm very self-conscious about my congestion and my nasally voice.

Justin: Don't be so self-conscious, Syd. I'm excited enough to carry this show for both of us today.

Sydnee: Thank you.

Justin: I couldn't be more excited.

Sydnee: I'm gonna do my best not to sniffle.

Justin: Do you know why I'm excited, Sydnee?

Sydnee: Why are you excited?

Justin: 'Cause I know the subject of this week's episode.

Sydnee: Ohh...

Justin: I made a button for it! [air horns] [in a digitally deepened voice]
Taint tanning!

Sydnee: Is that... is—

Justin: [air horns] *Taint tanning!*

Sydnee: This is not—

Justin: You don't have your headphones on.

Sydnee: I—I can hear it.

Justin: Sweetheart, if you could put your headphones on...

Sydnee: No, I can hear it from here.

Justin: I made the whole—[air horns] *Taint tanning!*

Sydnee: Yeah, I can hear it from here.

Justin: I made a whole... I made a button for it.

Sydnee: Uh-huh.

Justin: [air horns] *Taint tanning!*

Sydnee: This is not really the...

Justin: I'm not sure it's coming through on the track. One sec, let me make sure it's coming down the track. [air horns] *Taint tanning!* Yeah, okay. It's coming through on the track.

Sydnee: This is not really the—the look. Like, our podcast. I know maybe some of...

Justin: It's a little zoo crew.

Sydnee: Some of your other podcasts... this might...

Justin: Okay. It's reading a little zoo crew.

Sydnee: Fit.

Justin: I getcha.

Sydnee: We try to do something a little more professional here, Justin.

Justin: Alright, well, I'll try to keep my finger off the button. But you have got to tell me a little bit more about... [air horns] *Taint tanning!*

Sydnee: Okay, I'm not gonna call it that. I—is that word okay? We're gonna assume that word's okay.

Justin: It's not... I mean, it's... I don't—it's literal. Literally describes. It t'ain't your butthole, and it t'ain't your... front butt. Taint.

Sydnee: Okay. There were so many things wrong with that. [laughs]

Justin: Okay. Just sayin'.

Sydnee: I'm just gonna let it... I'm gonna call it perineum for the purposes of this.

Justin: [in a funny, Muppet-like voice] Ohh, hoo hoo! Beaker, hmm...

Sydnee: I can't even thank everyone, because man, this is how I learn about things now. I opened my—I opened the Sawbones email, and there was...

Justin: Ruined. Shelled from orbit.

Sydnee: So many of you were so fast to say, “Perineum tanning?” Or the other—the other popular subject was—

Justin: [air horns] *Taint tanning!*

Sydnee: Butthole sunning, question mark?

Justin: Not—not taint tanning. Okay, that was my guess.

Sydnee: No. Uh, and uh, tweets and Facebook messages. Thank you everybody who messaged this fascinating new health craze. Maybe? Question ma—health craze... ?

Justin: Health craze? ‘Craze’ is accurate, for sure.

Sydnee: Uh, I thought, well, I don't know what they're talking about, but I'll give it a Google, and frighteningly enough, it 'tis a thing. Uh, so, I wanted to talk about this practice that um... and ease some of your fears that I believe is perhaps not quite as widespread as some wellness people would have you believe. And uh, and also, kind of trace the roots of it a little bit back to heliotherapy.

Justin, do you know what heliotherapy is?

Justin: Well, I can tap into my Latin and say, ‘therapy’... is therapy. And ‘helio’ is of the sun.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. From the Greek ‘helios,’ yes.

Justin: So, therapy of the sun.

Sydnee: Yes. Sun therapy. So, very good. Yeah. And the idea that the sun is powerful, or life-giving, or in some way—

Justin: It’s both.

Sydnee: Well, y'know, you can trace this back to many ancient cultures, right? Like, that's not a wild thought.

Justin: And it's accurate. Powerful and life-giving.

Sydnee: Yes. Yes. Those things are true. But the idea that it would have some sort of health or wellness or medical applications is also not... it's not strange to think that that has been practiced throughout human history. I mean, people worshipped the sun, so there were, y'know, powerful beings who were based on the sun.

Justin: It's the biggest star. Why wouldn't we worship it?

Sydnee: So, it is not—it is not strange to—

Justin: It's huge.

Sydnee: We could trace a whole social, cultural, religious history of humankind's relationship with the sun. But that's not what we do here at Sawbones. I want to talk about the medical parts of it. And if you want to talk about what we think of as 'modern' heliotherapy, that story starts a lot more recently in the 1800s. Really, the late 1800s.

And then, the big, uh, interest, when it was very trendy, was probably in like the 1920s, 1930s. So, not that awfully long ago. So, this really starts out with a doctor from Iceland. Actually, a little collection of islands outside of Iceland. Uh, named Niels Ryberg Finsen. And he was—he was probably the first one to introduce what became the widespread sun cure, or sun treatment, or heliotherapy that people use.

And it's important to know, to understand kind of his story, that he carried a diagnosis, a chronic genetic disease, most of his adult life. And this really informs why he has this interest, and why he starts these trials that he starts. Um, he has been since thought to have what we would call Niemann-Picks disease.

Justin: What's that?

Sydnee: It's a—it's actually a collection of different, um... it's used to describe—there's several different varieties of it. So, depending on which one you have, which mutation you have, it's going to present very, very differently. But it has to do with lipid storage. I won't get into the particulars.

Justin: I feel like I wouldn't understand this.

Sydnee: It's one of those very complicated... we learn all of these, uh, diseases. There's like, the lipid storage, and lysosomal storage diseases, and there are all these different... [laughs] Diseases that every time you encounter them, I would assume, and I'm sure there are some genius medical professionals out there who don't have to look them up again, but I always have to look them up again. 'Cause there's a lot of them, and they're all very complex from a biochemical standpoint.

And especially with Niemann-Picks, there's different mutations that will cause different, completely different, clinical presentations. This is what we think he probably had. Although, it was hard from me reading descriptions of his symptoms and the different, y'know, kind of conditions he had, I'm not sure. He had some sort of chronic, genetic condition that started probably around the age of 23 is when he started having symptoms, which some varieties of Picks disease, that can happen. Some of them start really early. Some of them start later.

And uh, it caused, among a variety of other symptoms, he became very weak. Tired. He had greatly decreased functional capacity. It affected his lungs. He accumulated fluid in his abdomen, called Ascites. And he became very weak, and tired, and not a lot of strength. Not a lot of ability to do much of anything. His energy was greatly decreased, and it was very challenging for him, because he, at the time, if you had something... y'know, nobody knew exactly what was going on, right? We didn't know about Picks or Niemann-Picks. We didn't understand what was causing his symptoms or his condition.

So at the time, if somebody just suddenly has generalized kind of weakness and fatigue and decreased energy, the common treatments would've been things like, "Well, get more exercise." Y'know. "Get out, go swimming."

Justin: So not the worst advice.

Sydnee: But that wouldn't work in this case.

Justin: Correct.

Sydnee: Obviously.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And he, y'know, it was—it did not affect – although, some varieties of Picks disease can affect cognitive function, can affect your brain – it did not affect his brain. So, he could read and learn, and he already had his medical degree, and he knew about all the different things that people would advise him to do. Go get all these physical therapies, and go run, and swim, and lift weights, and all this stuff to kind of bring back your vigor.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: That wasn't going to work for him, and he knew that. And he was very limited in what he could do. So, he began to investigate the possibility... could sunlight be a treatment of some sort?

Justin: I could see the appeal. It's free. It's up there. And... I mean, that's—it helps plants grow. Why not? And it's easy to do. A lot easier than like, physical therapy or getting more exercise.

Sydnee: Well, and it—I'd say, for him, in this case, it was possible.

Justin: Yeah, much more feasible. I'm saying, I wish this worked, I guess is what I'm saying. [laughs] I wish... it sounds nice.

Sydnee: Yes, that's very true. Because he began to kind of experiment, I guess, if you can use that word. I mean, this is a light experimentation, on simply trying to... I guess he lived in like the north-facing part of his home, and so, his theory is that he got very little exposure to the sun's rays throughout the day. And uh, and at this point, he was in a wheelchair most of the time.

He tried to make sure that he was getting outside more and getting more exposure to the sun, and he began to investigate, is there some sort of healing property or energizing property, or something that the sun can do for you on its own that just simply sunbathing would allow?

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: And this is really where that interest comes from, and I think that's really interesting, 'cause you'll see that later in the story. People who are seeking a treatment for themselves who stumble upon something for other people. So, he began to sunbathe in an attempt to self-treat, and he must've felt that the results were positive, because he built upon his own experience, all the research that he would kind of devote his life to. I mean, he did some other things, but this was the primary area of his...

Justin: Seemed like some part of it was working.

Sydnee: He must've felt it was, right? Because otherwise, he probably wouldn't have investigated further. So, he started what was called the Medical Light Institute in Copenhagen, and this would later become the Finsen Institute, which I understand still operates today, but I think it does cancer research. They don't do heliotherapy anymore.

Uh, but their primary function, at first, was to investigate light for medicinal purposes. And this was in 1893 when he established this, and he began looking first into the treatment of two different, uh, skin conditions. Small pox, and then, the other one was what we called Lupus Vulgaris.

Justin: What's that?

Sydnee: It's actually another name for tuberculosis of the skin.

Justin: Oh, wow.

Sydnee: Yeah, we always think of tuberculosis as causing lung problems, which I mean...

Justin: It does.

Sydnee: It does. [laughs] This is not—that would be a wild twist.

Justin: Also, this whole time...

Sydnee: I know you always think of it as a lung thing. All a lie. [laughs] No, no, it is a lung thing. But it can also cause—the bacteria can cause these painful nodules on your skin. And so—

Justin: It is a different kind of tuberculosis, or is this a symptom of tuberculosis?

Sydnee: It's just a different manifestation of tuberculosis.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Uh, and so, we needed a way to treat that as well. And at the time, if you'll think, when we're talking about the late 1800s, early 1900s, we had no good treatments for tuberculosis.

Justin: No. We told people to go sit in—go out west. [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, why did we tell people that?

Justin: Well, I think it was for the air, right? Isn't that what we talked about, that it was for the clean, dusty air?

Sydnee: The dry air, but also for the sun. And where did that come from?

Justin: I don't know.

Sydnee: You're about to—that's what we're talking about!

Justin: Okay, alright! Yeah!

Sydnee: That's the whole point of this show. That's the point of this episode. This is where that idea came from. A lot of people have heard that. Y'know, famously, Doc Holliday went out west, right? Became a bad guy.

Justin: Whoa. Judgy. Judgy, much.

Sydnee: Just sayin'. Uh, because of his tuberculosis. Well, this is where this idea—it's what we're getting into, where it originates. So, he started out in the lab, but it's funny – he actually wrote about how, pretty quickly, he realized, like... and I wonder—I don't know. This is me hypothesizing about history. I wonder if his own concern for his own condition didn't stimulate the speed at which he researched this stuff, because he started out kind of investigating in the lab, but very quickly was trying this out with patients.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And he wrote about how he felt like—

Justin: I mean, he had to be desperate for answers, for sure.

Sydnee: Right. And he felt like it was important for this therapy in particular, and other ones would be similar that you don't rely on bench research in the lab before you bring it into the clinical world. You just kind of go for both at the same time. It was kind of first thought—

Justin: Well, you could understand that, too, considering the treatment is like, sit in the sun. Like... there was probably like... why not, right? At this point in time, like, I don't know. Like, let's just give it a whirl.

Sydnee: And it does show—I think it does show kind of a progressive understanding of the idea that, there are so many things... we talk about this on the show a lot. There are so many things that will kill a bacteria or a virus or a fungus in a lab, that you can't necessarily put in a human body and get the same result, either because it just doesn't work in the human body, or it will also kill the human body. [laughs] And so—

Justin: Like the rats and the aspartame, right?

Sydnee: Well... similar, but—

Justin: Not exactly. It's not guaranteed that it's gonna do whatever it does in a rat.

Sydnee: Well, I mean, I would say it's even similar to—y'know, it seems like an extreme example, but like, bleach. You can use bleach in a lab to kill a lot of things, but don't ever drink it.

Justin: Well, folks, we can't be more clear about that. Like, don't drink it.

Sydnee: Please. But he understood that. And so, he did all this research, he published many papers. He focused a lot on the idea of artificial light. He developed different artificial lights that would provide, hopefully, the same kind of heliotherapy. Phototherapy.

Justin: I would imagine, for research purposes, that's probably really important, right? Because you're not gonna be able to get consistent treatment if you're, y'know, having to deal with cloudy days, et cetera.

Sydnee: I would say that that is part of it, and then, the other part is, if you consider where he was doing his research.

Justin: In Copenhagen?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Yeah. I've seen some photos that have looked like there are some gray times there.

Sydnee: There were not un—he did not have a high density of days that he could do research out in natural sunlight, so...

Justin: I'm sure it's lovely. If you're a Sawbones listener there, I'm sure it's lovely.

Sydnee: Oh yeah, this is not a slam on Copenhagen. This is—I think that, in part, he thought, "Y'know what, I probably am gonna need an artificial light. Otherwise, I'm gonna not be able to advance my research very quickly."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Uh, so, he developed some artificial lights that he could use, and he published tons of papers. And according to the papers—and I mean, if you look back at some of the numbers, there are small numbers of patients. But when you—the parameters they were studying were like, decrease in pain, or decrease in number or size of skin lesions, or uh, things like weight gain. Y'know, 'cause that's always a big problem with like, tuberculosis, that it can be kind of a wasting disease. You lose weight, you become weak and malnourished pretty quickly.

And so, when you look at those metrics, it looks like the published results are positive. Who knows. I mean, eventually, as we know, antibiotics would be invented, and...

Justin: Hey. We didn't need the sun anyway. Get out of here, sun!

Sydnee: We don't need the sun. But he published some small but positive-facing results. And so positive that, in 1903, he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Justin: Wow.

Sydnee: For his innovations in light therapy.

Justin: But it—I mean, was it—did it work?

Sydnee: I mean, it's one of those things that's hard to say. It's kind of like we talked about with malariotherapy. The idea that you could induce a really high fever in someone with syphilis, and it would cure their syphilis. And they claimed a 30% cure rate. But it's hard to go back and try to validate any of those results.

I don't know how much... I don't think Finsen was claiming he could cure these conditions, necessarily, with the sun, or with artificial light, but that they did help and improve things.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: So I don't know, I've seen some people theorize that uh, if vitamin D deficiency was a problem in these patients as well, perhaps...

Justin: It was—yeah. That was what it was actually fixing.

Sydnee: Inadvertently fixing that. But either way, he was given the Nobel Prize, and uh, he died a year later after receiving the Nobel Prize of his chronic disease. But his work outlived him. It did not end there.

The international community, of course, after the Nobel Prize, had heard of his innovative research. And like I said, at this point in history, we're at 1904, there was no good treatment or cure for tuberculosis.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: It was... it was a death sentence. And so, anything that seemed to be showing positive results was of interest to the world. The entire world.

So one of these clinical scientists who was really interested was a doctor, Auguste Rollier, who was a Swiss physician. And based on... he went and visited and kind of learned from Finsen and learned what he was doing. So,

based on his research, he opened a number of sunbathing clinics all throughout the Swiss Alps, because he also felt—he felt that the sun was important, but so was altitude, because it was thought the air was more pure.

Justin: Closer to the sun, also.

Sydnee: Yes. So, he opened a bunch of very famous and kind of... [sighs] I always think of like, really fancy clinics.

Justin: I would've been the guy—

Sydnee: Because they're sunbathing clinics!

Justin: I would've been the guy who was like, "How much is it? A hundred dollars? Okay, how about this? How about I'm just gonna lie just outside the clinic? I'll be the guy who sets up a chair next to it, 'cause you're charging me to sit in the sun inside."

Sydnee: And I mean, I imagine it was a nice experience. Like, if you're talking about, uh, a time when medicine could be very scary and dangerous, right? I mean like, we're really talking about the heroic era of medicine when, look, we don't know what we're doing, but we've gotta save lives, so...

Justin: We're gonna get serious about medicine, and that—we're gonna crack a few eggs. [laughs]

Sydnee: We're gonna try everything.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Uh, if you consider that this particular radical idea was, come to the Swiss Alps... the most famous was in Leysin, Switzerland. Come to the Swiss Alps, sit outside in the beautiful mountain air in the sunshine, and relax and take it easy.

Justin: And that's the whole thing.

Sydnee: And that's the whole thing. Must've been pretty attractive.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But it didn't stop in Europe.

Justin: Well, what happened next, Syd?

Sydnee: Well, I'm gonna take us to the US, but first... we're gonna make a stop at the billing department.

Justin: Oh, let's go.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Do you have a great idea that you want to get out into the world? You want to free it from your mind jelly and let it spread its influence throughout the planet? The first step of your evil scheme of world domination. It starts... with Squarespace. Your partner in crime. Listen... you're not gonna attract James Bond's attention with a Twitter account. Are you kidding me? You need a real website that lists all your plans and the place where your evil lair is, and all the reasons that James Bond can't stop you, and why the world will be better once it's under your total control!

Sydnee: This seems like a trap, James Bond.

Justin: James Bond, it's not a trap. It is a place to blog or publish content, promote your physical or online business, or world domination plans. It lets you announce an upcoming event or special project like, say, the construction of a giant laser that's going to blow up the moon, for example, is one option there.

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ready to launch, use the offer code 'Sawbones' to save 10% off your first purchase of a website or a domain. Squarespace... I don't expect you to design a website. I expect you to call Squarespace. [laughs] Mr. Bond.

[music plays]

Mark: We interrupt the podcast you're listening to to tell you about another podcast. That's right – We Got This with Mark and Hal.

Hal: That's correct, Mark. This is Hal. We do the hard work for you – settling all of the meaningless arguments you have with your friends.

Mark: So tune in every week on the Maximum Fun network for We Got This with Mark and Hal, and all your questions will be asked and answered.

Hal: You're welcome.

Mark: Alright, that's enough of that.

Justin: Uh, so, Europe couldn't contain the sun.

Sydnee: No. No, Europe did not corner the market on the sun. It had to rise in the US as well. So, like I said, the work that Finsen had done attracted international attention, and then, especially once all of these clinics were opening up all over the Swiss Alps, not everybody could travel to Europe. That's pricy. Especially back then.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so, uh, Dr. Jeremiah Metzger is really probably one of the main people responsible for popularizing this treatment in the US. He actually started practicing medicine in Toledo, Ohio, but uh, he also fell ill, and it is thought that he probably did have tuberculosis. Again, it's one of those things where it's hard to say. I don't know that for sure. But it is thought that that is what he, uh, had gotten, maybe through his medical training, actually.

Justin: Oh wow.

Sydnee: Taking care of people with tuberculosis.

Justin: What a bummer.

Sydnee: So he moved out west, as people were wont to do with tuberculosis back then, for the sun and dry air that was thought to be good for the lungs.

Justin: And the gold.

Sydnee: He continued to work with TB patients. I think that's very noble. I mean...

Justin: Well, I mean, it—okay.

Sydnee: I'm just saying, like, he could've been bitter, but he wasn't.

Justin: I don't want to cast dispersions, but like, I would say that is the best possible person to be working with TB patients. I could make that argument.

Sydnee: Perhaps.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Either way, he eventually ended up Tucson, Arizona, where he opened a tuberculosis sanatorium. Sanatorium is what they called hospitals like that back then. It was like a hospital.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: So, anyway, uh, he operated there for a while using some of the common treatments of the time there. But then, he went to Switzerland and studied under Dr. Rollier for a year to learn more about this sun therapy.

And after he learned more about it, he brought it back to Tucson and spread it around the west. Opened the Desert Sanatorium.

And uh, and then you can see similar places like that were opened in... Colorado was a very popular place, because of the altitude. That was thought to be important. So you find places pop up all over the west coast, and then, in the Rockies, and then even uh, even in the east, there was one in upstate New York. A pretty famous sanatorium opened called the Saranac Sanatorium.

Justin: Oh!

Sydnee: Which was opened by Edward Livingstone Trudeau, who I mention because he was the grandfather of Garry Trudeau.

Justin: The Doonesbury guy?

Sydnee: [laughing] Yeah.

Justin: That is a connection that I was not expecting in this episode. Did not expect a Doonesbury connection.

Sydnee: No, I didn't see that coming either, as I was reading about the various people associated. This was a very famous sanitarium, and they were listing all the famous people who went and got treatment at this sanitarium, and uh—

Justin: Okay wait, I don't want to interrupt. Sanitarium, or sanatorium?

Sydnee: Y'know, actually, those terms were kind of use interchangeably back then. Some, depending on where, like the geographical location, whether you're more likely to call it a sanatorium or sanitarium. But either way, we're talking about a hospital for like, some sort of chronic, long-term illness, usually associated with tuberculosis at this time period. But you would find both used the same way.

Justin: Good to know.

Sydnee: Uh, the one—the Saranac Sanitarium treated, like I said, a lot of famous people, including Robert Louis Stevenson. He was treated there.

Justin: Uh... Treasure Island.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: That one.

Sydnee: That one. There you go. All of the other names, I didn't immediately recognize. You can look it up, and maybe you'll go, "Wow, she didn't even mention that this famous person was treated there!" And I'll go, "Well, I... I'm just a doctor."

Justin: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, too.

Sydnee: Well there you go.

Justin: Just different stuff that Robert Louis Stevenson did.

Sydnee: You can do that podcast later. Let's just focus on medicine right now.

Justin: Okay. [laughing] Got it. My book podcast, Crazy for Pages. A book podcast with Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: All it is is you discovering through Google different books that a particular author wrote. "Oh look."

Justin: Oh, the books that I've read!

Sydnee: "Oh, they also wrote this. Huh."

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: Huh. That guy. Got it.

Sydnee: Well... now an ad for Squarespace. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] Done our longest episode ever! Three minutes before the ad.

Sydnee: Anyway, obviously, the sun cure fell out of favor for tuberculosis because of... medicine.

Justin: [laughs] Yay.

Sydnee: We found better treatments for tuberculosis that worked really well and could actually cure people. So it wasn't—it wasn't so much about things that might stave off death, or things that might make you feel better, but things that would actually fix the tuberculosis.

Justin: Fix you.

Sydnee: But in the '20s and '30s, when it was so popular to go get this sun therapy, y'know, this heliotherapy, this was the same time. I think this explains a lot about Americans' kind of relationship with the sun, and tanning, specifically. At this same time that people were going to the sanitariums to lay in the sun for their health was when the concept of a 'healthy glow,' or y'know, a tan being a mark of wellness. This is the same time this idea kind of took hold in the American public.

So, you have this whole generation of people who grew up in a time when tanning was good for you, or at least, I'm saying that's what they believed. So good that some people went to special tanning clinics to tan under doctors' supervision for their health.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And you see this idea arise. And I mean, how long has it taken us to let go of that? I mean, still. Still, we're trying to undo the damage that that's done. Now, I think it is important to notice that this idea that light as a medical treatment is not completely off base. Uh, we don't usually call it heliotherapy, we usually call it phototherapy. But there are skin conditions for which we can use targeted phototherapy today.

Things like... I remember the first time I was in a dermatologist's office, and I saw their secret tanning bed back in the back, and I was like, "[gasps dramatically] What?!"

Justin: J'accuse!

Sydnee: "What is this?!" Uh, there are certain skin conditions that can benefit from very targeted doses of phototherapy. Things like very severe psoriasis, or vitiligo, something called scleroderma. There are a number of them. But it is important to know that when I say 'targeted phototherapy,' I don't mean that a doctor's going to tell you to go lay in the sun. No doctor should be telling you to do that. Ever.

What they will do is, under their supervision and medical guidance, they may, after a long discussion of risks and benefits, because there are risks to these treatments, like many treatments. They may suggest a very specific dosage, and timing, and amount, under their supervision, medical guidance, and their office, amount of phototherapy. This is not something—this is no way meaning, "So maybe you should lay in the sun."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: This is something a dermatologist would advise, supervise, and dispense. So, uh, in that context, we still see phototherapy used sometimes. And of course, we're more and more understanding that there's a relationship, of course, we know, between the sun and vitamin D. Now, there are other ways to get vitamin D supplement.

Justin: Mood. Like seasonal affective disorder.

Sydnee: Mood. Yes, that is very true.

Justin: I've used a light before.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. There are other things that we can use light therapy for. But again, there is no medical recommendation to go lay in the sun, unprotected, for anything, for any condition. Period. Because of course, that increases the risk of skin cancer. So... please do not do that.

Now, with all that in mind, how has this led us to—

Justin: [air horns] *Taint tanning!* [pause] I don't know. You gotta tell me.

Sydnee: So, the... as I pull away the curtain from this, what I have found is, this seems to be—

Justin: Thank you for the curtain, everybody. I did appreciate it, since you were sunning your butthole. I appreciated the privacy curtains. Thank you.

Sydnee: This appears to be something that is not a thing, that has built on not a thing, and underneath it is not a thing. This is all—this is all kind of—it's like fake medicine built on nothing. I think that this is traced to an Instagram post from somebody who is either trying to be like a wellness influencer, or maybe they just know that if you post some really weird wellness stuff that's fake, you'll go viral, because people like me will notice and get mad. I don't know. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So I may be part of the problem, perhaps. But either way, they posted about the benefits of what they called an ancient Taoist practice of perianal sunning. And uh, they list all of the benefits of sunning your perineum. The idea is that you can get an entire day's worth of sun exposure...

Justin: [laughing]

Sydnee: With just 30 seconds to five minutes of exposing your perineum to sun. And your perineum, by the way, is the thin piece of tissue between your anus and your genitals.

Justin: [laughing] So you might say that it... t'ain't your anus, and t'ain't your genitals.

Sydnee: Sure, Justin. *You* might say that. I would not.

Justin: And from that, one might derive the word...

Sydnee: But *you* might. Uh, so, from this, I think she calls it a 'node,' you can receive so much energy. She doesn't even need her coffee anymore because of how energized this person on Instagram feels after... after sunning their perineum.

Justin: You can't get energy that—it doesn't work like that! You're not a... [sighs] You're not a battery. No matter what the Matrix would have you believe.

Sydnee: No, you're not. That's not how any of this works.

Justin: You cannot eat the sun's energy for fuel, Meagan!

Sydnee: And of course, as with a lot of kind of wellness stuff, there's a whole list of things that it supposedly does.

Justin: Oh yeah, baby.

Sydnee: Like it helps with your libido, it balances your sexual energy, it helps with your circadian rhythms, it helps with focus and mental stimulation, um...

Justin: [bursts into laughter]

Sydnee: And some of these things—some of these things, I can't argue with, 'cause they're not real anyway.

Justin: Well, libido is easy, 'cause you do that, and you're like, "Alright, I'm all warmed up. Let's go." [laughing]

Sydnee: Well, but it—like, it increases your personal magnetism. Well, that's not a thing, so I don't know. Does it? It amplifies your auric field. Well...

Justin: I just looked at these pictures. I would say no. That one, I can concretely say no on the magnetism.

Sydnee: Now, it is in this post—it is noted that this is—the intention of this, and this is all in caps with many exclamation points, "The intention of this is not to tan your buttohole."

Justin: [whispering] Thank you. Wait, thank you. Thank you.

Sydnee: That is not what we are trying to do. Of course, you've got to be careful, I guess.

Justin: I'm trying to feel the gratitude of getting to hear you say that phrase on our medical podcast, Sydnee. Can I just enjoy that? It's so important to have little moments of gratitude. [sighs]

Sydnee: [laughs] Now, the roots of this, I do not think we can trace back to heliotherapy and Dr. Finsen, and the really, uh, I would say, sincere medical interest in the possibility of light therapy. The roots of this, I think, it seems, are from a book written by Dr. Stephen T. Chang called *The Tao of Sexology* in 1986, in which there is discussion of a kind of sun worship exercise, where you will expose your anal and vaginal areas, specifically, but I guess whatever genitalia can also be exposed. Doesn't have to be restricted to vaginas. But where if you expose them to the sun, uh, it's—it has germicidal properties. That you'll kill bacteria.

This is, uh, flawed. You cannot expose your... bottom to the sun and kill bacteria. And I mean, why do you want to? They're there for a reason. Keep

them there. Just leave them alone. Like, don't—don't—don't go touch them without washing your hands afterwards, please.

Justin: But let them do their grim work.

Sydnee: But let them do their thing. They're fine. They're supposed to be there. Leave them alone. So, I think that's what this is based on. It is—it has been cited by people who have kind of picked up on this "wellness" trend. Although, really, I think this is restricted to just a handful of people on Instagram.

Justin: Just Meagan. It may just be Meagan out there.

Sydnee: There may be other people out there, but I really think it's just—it's a very small number of people who are doing this, so I don't—I don't know that it is this like, wild trend that we are led to believe it is. Um, y'know, 'cause you can do that, right? If you write about something, all of a sudden it's like, "Oh my gosh, what's everybody on the west coast doing now?" But really, I think it might just be a handful of people.

But they claim – some of the people who are doing it and posting pictures... 'cause that's why this is going viral, right?

Justin: Of course.

Sydnee: Because like, it's paired with all these pictures of nude people laying outside, usually on like, rocks in the desert or whatever, with their legs spread.

Justin: Yeah, that's something I wanted to say. Meagan says that it's a daily practice for her, and she is laying nude on a rock with nothing. One, Meagan... can you not use a towel? Will that impede the sun exposure to your perineum? Like, this is your whole day. Like, I've got like, rock imprints on my back. I had to drive out to the desert. Like, can you not just do it, like, on your porch? Like, I don't understand why it has to be on a beautiful, beautiful rock. It doesn't make any sense to me.

Sydnee: Uh, I guess it probably—you're more connected to the earth, I would say.

Justin: I guess.

Sydnee: This is my guess in wellness speak. So, a lot of these people are claiming that it has something to do with traditional Chinese medicine. Uh, so, I did not have to do this legwork. Rolling Stone actually did a story about this and reached out to the Traditional Chinese Medicine World Foundation to ask them if this is a traditional Chinese medical practice.

Justin: A thing.

Sydnee: And... [laughs] They're quoted as saying... a representative summed it up as, "We don't talk about it. We don't practice it. Why would you write about it?" And then hung up. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, so not only is it fake, but I have some problems with these people applying your fake medical wellness thing to an entire culture other than your own, their medical practices, their ancient medical traditions, blaming this for this bad idea you had about... butthole sunning. Because—

Justin: [air horns] *Taint tanning!* It's an alternative. Just a different way you would say it.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. If I haven't made it clear, this is not a thing. This will not give you energy. This will not... any of those things that it's supposed to do, it's not going to do. And in fact, it is dangerous, because that—that skin is particularly sensitive. All your skin should be protected when you're out in the sun. Period. Whether by clothes – seems kind of obvious – or sunscreen. You need something if you're going to be out in direct sunlight. You should not be exposing your skin, unprotected, to direct sunlight, period. But that skin is especially sensitive.

So there is no one who would recommend you do this. There is no benefit to it. Uh, the best case scenario is nothing happens. The worst case scenario is, you damage your skin, you get a sunburn, which apparently, according to tabloids, Josh Brolin did when he attempted it, and then wrote—and then it was written that he is quoted as saying that he burned his buttole.

Justin: [laughs] I don't know Josh Brolin personally, but that, from what I know of Josh Brolin, that seems extremely on brand for him. He seems like the sort of person who would end up with a burned buttole.

Sydnee: And if what you're thinking is, "But Sydnee—"

Justin: I like him.

Sydnee: "I don't want to put sunscreen on my perineum." I have another solution for you. Just like... pants. [laughs]

Justin: Just pants.

Sydnee: Pants. Shorts. Underwear. Whatever you—whatever your clothing of choice is to cover your perineum, I would continue to wear it while in direct sunlight. I have no problem with nudity. I think nudity is great. It doesn't bother me. But I do want you to protect your skin from the sun. So if you feel the need to expose your perineum, please do it inside where the sun cannot harm it.

Justin: Ye—in the privacy of your own home. Uh, thank you so much for listening to our podcast. We hope you've enjoyed it. Um... okay, updates. Uh, one, you know this. We have a book. Uh, called The Sawbones Book. You can buy it at stores. Y'know, the holidays are coming up, and booy oh boy, is it a great gift for those, uh, special people in your life.

Um, we want to tell you about the Candlenights... well, the celebration is coming up soon. Uh, the Candlenights Star drive that Sydnee's sister, Raleigh, organizes, is now... what is it, is it its third year? Fourth year? Third year, right?

Sydnee: Third, I believe.

Justin: Yeah, third year. Um, raising money for the Contact 24 hour rape crisis center. I think specifically the Huntington branch of it. It's a great deal. What you do is, you can donate five dollars or more if you would like, and you'll get a star that will be displayed during our Candlenights show.

If you go to bit.ly/CandlenightsStars2019. Did you get that? Bit.ly/CandlenightsStars2019. If you go there, you can donate to that, and it's a great—it's a wonderful cause, so go for it. You have, I think like, two weeks at this point.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Right around that.

Sydnee: So thank you. Thank you, if you can, for helping us help out this great organization.

Justin: Thank you to the Taxpayers for the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to Maximum Fun, our podcast network. They got a new website. If you go to MaximumFun.org, you can see their great face lift they just got. And uh, I believe that's gonna do it for us, Syd, for this week's episode. Thank you so much for listening. 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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