

Sawbones 324: The Cholera Riots

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[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: And uh, we're in a weird period of... of the uh, whole COVID thing. Feelin' kind of...

Sydnee: What period hasn't been weird, Justin?

Justin: That's true, yes. No, we haven't really gotten to a new normal, have we? It's just kind of a shifting tourniquet. [laughs]

Sydnee: It's okay. Life has changed. We just must adapt.

Justin: Some people are still very much on board with the whole... reality of the situation that we find ourselves in.

Sydnee: Sure.

Justin: And some people are kind of pushin' up against that and trying to find some other, uh, ways to... maybe think about truth. [laughs] Which is the... which is...

Sydnee: 'Some other ways to think about truth' is a very generous way of putting it.

Justin: [laughing] Yeahhh, I did my best.

Sydnee: I think that, uh, that... man, that's a perfect lead-in to what we are talking about here.

Justin: Well, thanks, 'cause that's what it was designed as.

Sydnee: Well, you didn't know—you don't know the whole topic, so...

Justin: No, I don't.

Sydnee: It's funny how spot on you are.

Justin: Thank you, I guess.

Sydnee: You normally aren't. [laughs]

Justin: I happened—I happened on it by chance, so I can't take too much credit, so...

Sydnee: Uh, so, I think that, in times like these, where a lot of people are afraid, a lot of people are stressed out, and you start to see some of like, your social systems break down a little bit...

Justin: A little bit.

Sydnee: A little bit.

Justin: A little bit of anarchy.

Sydnee: Yes. Well, not full...

Justin: A piquant.

Sydnee: No, just some chaos. A little bit of chaos.

Justin: The vaguest whiff of chaos.

Sydnee: Yes. Uh, I think that—

Justin: Like a dog, chasing a car.

Sydnee: No, we're not going there.

Justin: They want to know how I... you wanna know why I wear this mask?

Sydnee: And I think—I think in times like that, it's really key that you're getting kind of a unified message, uh, from your leaders as to, how do we deal with this? And I think right now, uh, it is fair to say... I think everyone could agree that we are not getting a single message from our leaders.

Justin: Mm-hmm. We're getting a lot of them. If I may continue my generosity, a potpourri of different guidance and messages. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Even from... individual people.

Sydnee: Yes, who may say one thing and tweet something else.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Which can be very confusing. And I think, if you're already afraid and not certain of how to deal with a situation, and especially if it's something... like a pandemic, where... unless you're in the medical field, you don't necessarily speak that language. And then, on top of that, even those of us in the medical field don't have all the answers, 'cause we're still learning.

I think that that—people can react in various unhelpful ways. And obviously, many helpful ones, I would say. Let's be positive.

Justin: For sure.

Sydnee: Many people have reacted in very helpful, good, human ways.

Justin: But I think, if I can, uh... and maybe this period of generosity has just overtaken me. Uh, I feel like the... the not—the lack of certainty... uh, creates an environment where... finding the right thing, or the true thing, is a little bit trickier than it was before. Or making judgments, if I would—

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Sydnee and I—Sydnee knows as much about this as anybody I know in my life, and she and I still have to have long conversations about, like, what's right. What feels right. Partially, that's due to a vacuum of leadership that we're having to fill with our own judgment. Um, but, yeah. I mean, I think it's a confusing time.

Sydnee: Yes. And so, it can be really easy to kind of... stay in denial. Because you might be getting messages that are telling you what you want to hear. And I think there's also a lot of, uh... it's been highly politicized what the right thing to do is, as if you're making a statement about your own values, as opposed to trying to do the safest, best thing for yourself and each other.

Instead, it's like...

Justin: I'm making a—I'm taking a stand, right?

Sydnee: I'm taking a—right. And so, instead of doing really helpful things, we take to the streets and demand haircuts, and flood bars as soon as they open, and... threaten McDonald's employees unless we get to sit in the dining room to eat.

Justin: Listen. The one on Hal Greer just remodeled, and if I'm not complaining about sitting in that beautiful dining room that has, like, some really lovely water features and what have you... nobody should be complaining.

Sydnee: [laughs] Uh... that's fair. Y'know, I—when it is safe to eat in the dining room at McDonald's, you're free to go do that by yourself. I don't know that I'll be joining you.

Justin: Listen, as soon as it's safe, I'm gonna be taking the kids to the Play Place, lettin' 'em lick every surface in there, no problem.

Sydnee: Mm, nope. Nope. It'll be a long time before that'll be okay in this house. Anyway!

Justin: Negative Nancy. Killin' me with negativity.

Sydnee: This is not—this is not unprecedented. Humans have done this before. [laughs] Uh, they—they have seen a threat right in front of them, and denied that it was real. Usually, because they thought political leaders were corrupt, were inflating the crisis for their own purposes, whether it was misdirection, distraction, uh, an expansion of government power and authoritarian goals...

For whatever reasons, they have kind of not been able to see the truth and the best actions that they could take, and they've turned on, uh, the people who are supposed to be taking care of them. Especially like, doctors and nurses and other medical professionals, whose job it is to try to help manage the crisis. They have turned on those very people and called them murderers and liars and... and threatened them.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: So I don't know if it makes you feel better to know this has all happened before. [laughs] But if it does... this episode might make you feel better.

Justin: Well, let's do it.

Sydnee: So, I want to talk about the cholera riots. Which I had never heard about the cholera riots until we got an email from Shauni, so thank you, Shauni, uh, for calling them to my attention. And I think they're really interesting. Especially, they happened, um, many, many years ago in the 1830s, but... right around this time.

Justin: Of the year?

Sydnee: End of May, beginning of June. We're almost like... almost at the exact dates that this occurred. Not exact, but pretty darn close.

Justin: It's that thermometer! That mercury starts rising, spring is here, spring is here, life is Skittles, life is beer... and all of a sudden, everybody wants to get out there and uh, shake it, I guess. Just get out there and shake it.

Sydnee: Right. Uh, even if there's cholera.

Justin: Especially!

Sydnee: [laughs] So, we did a whole episode about cholera before. You may have remembered John Snow and the hand pump, and... epidemiology and all that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Okay. So, I won't get into cholera itself too much. It's a terrible diarrheal illness, um, which spreads through water, typically, and uh, contaminated drinking water. And it makes people very sick, and has a high mortality if you're not treated effectively and appropriately. Nowadays, we're way better at managing diarrheal illness, with something as simple as rehydration. IV fluids if needed, or oral rehydration, however.

Justin: They could've figured that one out on their own, in hindsight.

Sydnee: No, no, no. It was—I mean, it took a while.

Justin: They didn't have Pedialyte? Come on.

Sydnee: They didn't have Pedialyte.

Justin: That's what I just said.

Sydnee: [laughs] Anyway... cholera pandemics plagued humankind for centuries, because it would spread very quickly. People didn't understand how it was spreading, so they didn't do anything really helpful to prevent it at first. And we didn't have any good... I mean, the treatments for it were the same treatments for everything else that was bad. Which is like, let me put a leech on you, and that's not... that's not helpful.

Um, the word 'cholera' would actually come to describe... a variety of diarrheal illnesses. And this becomes important. So, because somebody would get really bad diarrhea, and we have no idea why, back in the 1800s, the doctor might say, "Well, it's the summer cholera." Or the fall cholera. Or the winter cholera. Just whatever time of year it is.

Justin: It's like the sleep regressions. The four month sleep regression, the six month sleep regression... it's just the cholera of the season.

Sydnee: Right. Whatever month your baby is, there's a sleep regression for that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, same idea. And this was opposed to what would eventually be called the Asiatic cholera, cholera morbidus, or, nowadays, we'd just call it cholera. Which was actual, bad, can kill you, cholera.

A lot of these other things were just like, ya got diarrhea. And this matters, because you can imagine the difference between... it's summer. A lot of your family and friends are getting the summer cholera. Which, you go to the doctor, and they're like, "Eh, yeah. Sorry. Don't worry. Do these unhelpful

things.” And you do them, and you get better, because you were gonna get better, ‘cause it was just some diarrhea, right? No big deal.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But then, all of a sudden, there are some doctors and government officials saying, “Whoa whoa whoa, no. That cholera, though, that cholera you have is different. That’s a terrible cholera, and you need to go to a special hospital to get taken care of for that cholera, which is a little different.”

Justin: Kind of judgy.

Sydnee: Well, you can see why people would be confused. I think that it’s important to understand that, as it plays into the rest of this story. Like, wait a second... how come the cholera I had last week was no big deal, but then, my brother gets that cholera, and he’s gotta go to a lazaretto? What the heck are you talking about? Which was a quarantine hospital, you may remember.

Justin: Yeah, I remember that.

Sydnee: Yes. So anyway, we’re gonna start in St. Petersburg. I want to talk about two places. St. Petersburg and Liverpool. We’re gonna start in St. Petersburg, where probably some of the first cholera riots occurred. Although... yeah. Probably some of the first ones. Although, these would occur many different places.

Uh, in the summer of 1831, the cholera epidemic was spreading. A lot of people were getting very sick. A lot of people were dying. And in response to this, the—they had done what a lot of places were doing, which was trying to quarantine those that were sick, take them to special cholera hospitals to keep the disease contained in one place.

There was not an understanding of how it was spread yet, right? This is all pre John Snow. We don’t know about the water. Probably miasma theory permeated most areas, so like...

Justin: Bad. Which is like, bad at air, basically.

Sydnee: Exactly.

Justin: Bad air.

Sydnee: Bad air is spreading the disease. Um, and they didn't really understand why some people got sick and others didn't, at that point. So, part of what was happening at this time is that the lower socioeconomic classes didn't really trust those in power. Especially, not just those—not just the government leaders, but like, the ruling class in general. The educated elites...

Justin: Got it.

Sydnee: ... were seen as not... people who could not be trusted. People with nefarious goals. Um, and they—a lot of the lower socioeconomic classes felt that the quarantines, and like, especially the kind of military response that was taking place in a lot of parts of Russia, where you had like, y'know, armed soldiers at different points in the city to stop you from going places. A lot more intense than what we've seen here.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: That they were being used, as opposed to protecting, y'know, people from the disease spreading, they were being used to keep sick, poor people in together. And not keep disease out. So basically, we're locking you all in together, because we're trying to get rid of people we see as undesirable.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: This belief was very widespread. And so, they didn't see these measures being taken by the government as something for their benefit, but as something directed to harm them. On top of that, a conspiracy theory began to spread, that perhaps the government was responsible for this.

Justin: Really.

Sydnee: Now, this would've not been a germ, because we didn't really understand that. It was poison. There was a belief that the government was poisoning the wells.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: And that people were getting sick, because they were just... uh, the phrase used a lot was 'cull the herd.' Let's get rid of... the poor.

Justin: And those are usually... uh, the wells typically had, uh, five gallon buckets. They referred to them as 5G, usually.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: And the assumption was that the 5G was poisoning people. The government was using 5G to poison people.

Sydnee: [laughs] So... the problem, uh... the problem with this on several levels is, you can see where, if you believe that the government and those who are more educated are behind all this... they're making you sick, and it's targeted at you, and they're keeping you all together so that you all get sick... uh, you can see where like, anybody who would support the idea of a quarantine would also be viewed with suspicion.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So this was very quickly spread to like, the doctors and the sanitary inspectors, and people who were responsible for trying to enforce these different regulations, were also viewed as part of the conspiracy very quickly.

Um, crowds gathered in the square in St. Petersburg to protest. There were several other places in Russia where this happened, but I wanted to focus on St. Petersburg first. Um, they were initially just like, chanting and marching,

and y'know, yelling and things. It expanded to where they actually—they would find a sanitary inspector, whose job—who worked for the public health department, so to speak, and beat them up.

Justin: Ugh.

Sydnee: Y'know, as part of the conspiracy. This, uh, escalated until they went and like, ransacked the closest cholera hospital. They started trying to find doctors. I couldn't find any evidence of them actually killing doctors, but like, the goal was, we're gonna find the doctors and put them to death, because they're murdering the poor. They're part of the conspiracy.

There was a big suspicion that the doctors were actually part of the poisoning, because you would go—you would be taken to a hospital if you had cholera, and then you would die there. So, the idea was that you weren't really that sick, you just had the regular ol' cholera that everybody gets... but then the doctors gave you poison. The medicine they were giving you was actually poison.

Justin: Ohh. Okay.

Sydnee: And that's why you died.

Justin: Sure. Sure.

Sydnee: Um... so, the doctors were killing people, not the disease. And in addition, you would have like... this—these public health officials whose job it was to go like, find sick people and take them to a hospital. And try to remove them. Especially if they were in like, a multi-family dwelling, or like, in a big family. Like, get the sick person out.

Justin: Mm-hmm. So they're like, removing people from their families, basically.

Sydnee: And they would never return.

Justin: Mmm. I mean, it seems sinister. I mean, I—especially in a time when we don't understand things nearly as well as we do now, it seem—it seemed sinister.

Sydnee: And I mean—and I don't—I am not a... I've said this on the show many times. I am not a professional historian, and I certainly am not a professional historian when it comes to... Russia in this time period. But my understanding is, a lot of this was fueled by the tension that already existed between the different classes.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Y'know, between the ruling class that had a lot of the money and power and education, and the lower classes who did a lot of hard work and weren't... appropriately rewarded for that. So, all of this played into this.

Justin: Which is a tension that's really as old as time itself. Like, as long as we've had...

Sydnee: Exactly.

Justin: Pretty much society. I would assume that that tension is persistent.

Sydnee: I think it's important to recognize that the idea that you wouldn't trust the ruling class is not a wild idea.

Justin: No.

Sydnee: At any point in time, almost anywhere, certainly today, here, the idea that your leaders, you would question their motivations... I don't think we should criticize people for that. Because they are often right to question the motivations of the ruling class.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: All of this apparently ended when... and I found like, an engraving of this. Czar Nicholas came out into the square himself and demanded, like,

everybody stop what you're doing, kneel, and take your hat off. I don't know why the taking the hat off was so important. [laughs] But that's definitely part of the story. I kept finding that reference. He said, "Kneel and take your hats off." So I guess that's a way of like... it's like, deference.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Take your hat off to me, and that kind of suppressed this riot.

Justin: Wow, bad riot. [laughs] I think that's kind of a lame riot.

Sydnee: That—I don't see that working now. Um, and there were other riots in other parts of Russia and throughout Europe. And the common themes were these same things. Distrust of the government, conspiracy theories, that this was aimed at the poor... or that this was a way to limit freedoms. Y'know, in places where like, the idea of personal freedom was a newer one, where we were having these like, overthrows of these kind of monarchies and things. Then, this kind of oppressive idea of quarantine really rubbed people the wrong way.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, the pandemic reached the UK late 1831. The first case was a guy named William Sproat in Sunderland, who got really sick. He was given brandy and opium, which was the treatment of the day. But he died, and then, by...

Justin: Probably hopin' he'd get in the history books for something else, but hey. Good job, William.

Sydnee: Well, we all remember, he was the first... in this particular run of cholera.

Justin: Nobody says like, "Good at darts. Nice guy."

Sydnee: He may have been. We could say that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Nice guy.

Justin: Nice guy. Good at darts. I don't know.

Sydnee: Sure. So there was an outbreak that followed, and it ended the summer of the following year, and by that time, 21,882 would've died. Many more would've been ill, and this is just estimates, of course.

Um, because of the people, again, the miasma theory, that just bad air that's making us sick, nobody really knew how to prevent it... it wouldn't be until 1849 that John Snow would tell us it's because we're drinking raw sewage, guys. Maybe we should stop. Um... [laughs]

Justin: Grody.

Sydnee: This is gross. Uh, they tried to do the—like, you can see like, local health departments created in response to this throughout the UK, and quarantines were started, but not much helped. And there was a lot of unrest due to the fact that, unlike typhus, which we've talked about on the show, which was mainly restricted to the lower socioeconomic classes. People who were crowded, and... like we've talked about, poverty is a big risk factor for typhus. Cholera doesn't discriminate.

So yeah, certainly crowded living conditions can let it spread faster. But once it gets into a house, it doesn't matter how much money you have. Cholera spreads. And they were seeing that even healthy, upper class citizens were getting sick.

So came the riots to several places throughout the UK by 1832. And like I said, especially Liverpool. So for the—I want to focus on Liverpool for the rest of the show.

Justin: Alright, let's hear it.

Sydnee: But before we do that...

Justin: Oh man.

Sydnee: Let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go!

[theme music plays]

[advertisements play]

Justin: [in a British accent] Sydnee.

Sydnee: Oh no.

Justin: [in a British accent] We were gonna go to Liverpool, weren't we?

Sydnee: Oh no. [laughs] I should've seen this coming.

Justin: [in a British accent] Well, I'm just givin' a little bit of that Liverpudlian atmosphere.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: [in a British accent] Let's go to Liverpool.

Sydnee: I knew this would happen.

Justin: [in a British accent] I'm in Liverpool!

Sydnee: Okay. Well, you can keep workshopping your Liverpudlian accent as we discuss...

Justin: [in a British accent] I'm in Liverpool!

Sydnee: ... the cholera riots. So...

Justin: [in a British accent] I'll work on it.

Sydnee: The epidemic hit the city on May 17th of 1832. By the time this all ended... it's wild how they know these exact dates. September 13th is the date that it supposedly ended. Um, it would infect three percent of the population and about 31% of the infected died. Uh, I want to focus on...

Over a course of about two weeks in late May and early June of 1832, there were eight separate riots in Liverpool.

Justin: Wowzers!

Sydnee: Because of cholera. The city tried to respond, initially, really quickly, by establishing two different hospitals for cholera, which were sometimes called lazarettos, but either way. Hospitals specifically for cholera. Which shouldn't sound too weird, 'cause we've done that now, right? I know in New York, they've had hospitals that were specifically addressing COVID in other places where there were a high number of patients. In China, I know they were doing that.

Um, and they also had a fleet of um, palanquins, which were like, big carts specifically for taking people to the hospital. Uh, and... y'know, Liverpool was set up for getting big outbreaks of cholera, for the same reason that, actually, a lot of cities throughout the UK and other places at the time would've been. Sewage.

Justin: [sneezes] They had sewage?

Sydnee: Well, nobody really knew how to deal with sewage at this point in history. And we've talked about this, but like, water sanitation was a major issue. Nobody quite understood why it was so important.

The idea, again... if your water looked clean, you would assume it was clean, because you didn't really understand about germs yet.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, uh, there were a lot of places where... it would've been gross to drink the water. And Liverpool was one of them. I think... [laughs] If you add into that that it was booming at the time, it was a big shipping port, there were a lot of people moving in and out of the city, and a huge influx in population growth. So...

Justin: Including four young men... well, five, if you count Pete Best. Four young men who would go onto redefine, uh, the sound of pop music. The Be—The Beatles.

Sydnee: In 1832?

Justin: They were very young.

Sydnee: I don't think—

Justin: The early years. The Beatles.

Sydnee: I don't think you... have you lost your concept of time?

Justin: Beatles Babies. We called them Beatles Babies...

Sydnee: Have you lost, like...

Justin: ... is what the show was about them.

Sydnee: Like, the way linear time... has that abandoned you?

Justin: I'm excited—I'm just excited for John and George and Pete and Paul and Ringo to turn up in the story.

Sydnee: They won't be in this story. I'm sorry.

Justin: Oh. Okay.

Sydnee: Y'know what? Actually, I'll let you add them onto the end. When we get to the end, you get to add on the part where the Beatles come.

Justin: Okay. And they get together.

Sydnee: Do you know what I'm bummed, by the way? I've been to Liverpool, because uh, I wanted to go there 'cause of the Beatles. I think a lot of us, like, get excited to go there 'cause of the Beatles. And I didn't know about the cholera riots, and I would've been very excited to learn about the cholera riots, had I known about it when I went there.

Justin: I bet you would've found those landmarks to be much less crowded!
[laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] That's probably true. So, a lot of these same issues that would lead to these riots in Liverpool, that we've already talked about in Russia and other parts of Europe... a lot of those same ideas were part of the problem. But there is a specific issue that I think makes the—the cholera riots in Liverpool very interesting.

Uh, there was a specific concern that seemed to motivate how many riots they had, and how upset people were. Liverpool had a complicated history when it came to doctors already, at this point. And it is fair to say that, at this point in history, going to a doctor was a roll of the dice.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I'm not saying that people weren't doing their best. I'm just saying that... their best wasn't always that great.

Justin: [laughs] Fair enough.

Sydnee: As we've already referenced. Anyway.

Justin: They had to invent apples to keep doctors away. That's where we're at right now in history.

Sydnee: [laughs] We're at that point. In the... so, a couple reasons. I want to go over a couple instances that might give you a picture as to, if you were living in Liverpool at this point in history, why doctors may not have been your personal heroes. So—

Justin: Because your personal heroes were already John, Paul, George, and Ri—

Sydnee: No, no. [laughs] So, at this point, in order to get bodies to dissect if you were a medical student or a doctor in training... in order to get bodies to dissect, it was very difficult. We've talked about this on the show. Anatomical dissection was very... mmm... it was not okay, and there were very narrow avenues to obtain bodies to dissect through legal means.

Justin: Right. So you had like, resurrection men.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Digging bodies up for cash.

Sydnee: And specifically, this was... this happened a lot in Liverpool. In part, because it was—because of its ports, it was a nice place to ship bodies to and from. There were a lot of bodies imported from Dublin. And in the 1820s, it was not uncommon for them to—for like, port authorities to smell something, and then, investigate some cargo, and... find a bunch of bodies there.

And what it led to were a lot of like... a lot of people gettin' paid for movin' bodies around, and a lot of people like, "Oh, I just stumbled on your bodies. You better pay me, too. I'm'a be part of this operation now."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And so, a lot of that was going on, and at the same time, doctors in the community were kind of defending some of this. Saying like...

Justin: Gotta have our bodies.

Sydnee: We need—like, we don't—obviously, we're not making you better most of the time, so we need to learn more. Please, this is the only way we're gonna learn. And so, it already—there was this kind of, mm, we don't know what side the doctors are on. And then you had like, a case in 1824 where there were people found specifically digging up bodies for one of the local doctors, for a very respected doctor in society, William Rathbone.

They knew he was attached to these grave robbers, and he kind of came out and said like, y'know, uh... we just need to change the law. This is okay. I think this is a—we need these bodies, and I'm sorry that we have to do it illegally, but it's because it should be legal. And again, this just added to this idea of the mistrust of doctors.

In 1826, there was this huge incident where they found 33 bodies on the docks being prepared to be shipped to Scotland for dissection. Somebody paid to ship them to Scotland. And then, in 1828, there was a huge, well-publicized trial of a local surgeon, William Gill, who like, is known as one of the fathers of like, anatomical dissection in Liverpool, who like, trained a lot of, y'know, students and doctors, who was found guilty of a whole grave robbing operation.

Justin: Do you think you missed your calling doing this podcast, and not a podcast about grave robbing? You love grave robbing more than anybody I know.

Sydnee: I don't love grave robbing! I do not endorse grave robbing!
[laughing]

Justin: No, but...

Sydnee: No, I don't!

Justin: What's the 'but' after that?

Sydnee: I don't have a 'but'! I mean—

Justin: You have a butt. You're wearing MeUndies. What's the 'but' of that? 'Cause you *love* to talk about grave robbing!

Sydnee: No, I just—I think it is one of those—I like—

Justin: You wish you could be a grave robber now!

Sydnee: No!

Justin: And be like, "I'm doing it for science!"

Sydnee: No. I like moral gray areas. I think that grave robbing is reprehensible. But I think—

Justin: But! But! But! There it is!

Sydnee: I do think that doctors needed bodies for dissection! And so, it's—but I don't think they should've done it that way, but there was no other way—I like these kinds of conundrums!

Justin: Whatever. You would've been—you would've been Scarlet Syd, the terror of the cemetery.

Sydnee: It's fascinating.

Justin: You would've been digging up the—the lady grave robber, have you heard?! Scarlet Syd, the terror of the cemetery!

Sydnee: I would never have or would... I would never rob graves.

Justin: Lock your coffins, or Scarlet Syd would come for you!

Sydnee: It was not the right thing to do. But I understand the situation they were in! [laughs]

Justin: But, but, but! Love grave robbin'.

Sydnee: I don't.

Justin: We talked about grave robbing—it was a side tangent. You could've just said doctors weren't trusted. No. You're gonna park the car and get out at Grave Robbing Bluff and show the kids the sights!

Sydnee: Listen. I'm painting a picture.

Justin: Sure, you're just using a lot of the color labeled 'grave robbing'!

Sydnee: I'm just saying, in 1828, this well-known surgeon stands trial, is found guilty of grave robbing, of running a whole operation, and do you know what his punishment was?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: 30 pounds. He paid 30 pounds. Which is—I mean, I'm sure that was a lot of money back then, but still.

Justin: You're writing a note to me. It says, "Far too much. They should've been paying him to steal all these great bodies."

Sydnee: I'm not! No I'm not! But not only that, do you know how he probably paid it?

Justin: What?

Sydnee: With all the money he made from selling bodies. [laughs]

Justin: Profitable and moral. You love grave robbing.

Sydnee: No, but the point is, if you can imagine being a citizen there, and you just saw like... everybody knew about this guy, this surgeon, who stood trial. He did a terrible thing. He robbed graves. He had to pay 30 pounds.

Justin: Why are you winking when you say terrible?

Sydnee: And he's still working.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: He's still working. And then, on top of that, that same year, what was happening in Edinburgh?

Justin: The French festival?

Sydnee: The Burke and Hare murders!

Justin: Ohh.

Sydnee: That same year, we're hearing that up in Scotland, there are these two guys who, not only are they grave robbing for doctors, they're killing people!

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: For doctors!

Justin: That's a fun story. You should dig into that one.

Sydnee: I thought we've done that.

Justin: We did. I'm saying the listener at home should find that episode and enjoy it.

Sydnee: So, it was in this context...

Justin: It's in our book, too. I think it's in the Sawbones book.

Sydnee: It is, yeah. We have a whole diagram of how to rob a grave.

Justin: Hm. Interesting.

Sydnee: That sounded really bad.

Justin: Yeah, no. Just sounded on par for you, Syd.

Sydnee: It's supposed to be like, a joke. I know it's a joke. But anyway. So it was in this context that the epidemic of cholera hits Liverpool. They have these cholera hospitals. They're carting people off to the cholera hospitals when they get sick. Uh... and the—the people of Liverpool don't trust the doctors. They don't trust the government officials. They don't understand why this is all happening, because nobody understood disease back then.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And they don't trust what the doctors are doing with their family and friends when they get them to the hospital.

Justin: Fair.

Sydnee: So on May 29th, 1832, uh, a dock worker and his wife go see a doctor. And they're both sick. Uh, the husband had been sick first. The wife got sick next. Uh, the wife was much sicker. And so, the doctor had her put on a palanquin and hauled off to the hospital.

By then, a mob of women and boys, largely, had gathered outside the building. Outside the doctor's office, to try to find out, like... what's this doctor? This crook gonna do?

So they gathered outside, and uh, they took—they took, first, the wife to the hospital. Later that day, the husband was getting sicker, so the doctor decided he should be taken to the hospital as well. The mob got bigger. They followed the uh, patients. The poor, sick patients to the hospital. Gathered outside. First, yelling, then throwing rocks.

And the thing that they yelled... was 'Burker.' The primary reason for the Liverpool riots is that they thought, because of this history, that doctors were using these people...

Justin: For experimentation.

Sydnee: ... and anatomical dissection.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: That this was all intentional. And there were even—doctors were chased through the streets because of this there. Um, they uh... they began to have to have police details to follow them around. Because they were so often chased through the streets, called Burkers, and attacked.

There was a patient who, at one point, was discharged from the hospital, and as she left, she was mistaken for somebody who was helping the doctors. Who was, y'know, an assistant, a nurse, something. Another Burker. And she was chased out of the hospital. People throwing rocks at her, accused of being a Burker.

Uh, and y'know, it didn't help that the doctors weren't great at treating cholera.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Because they didn't understand it. They were using the treatments of the day. Bleeding and opium and brandy. Things that would make you puke. None of that was helpful. Um, there was an observation in the press that I think is really interesting in context of today, where they said, y'know, um... the uh, the people who go into the hospital are more likely to die of cholera than the people who stay at home with the cholera.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And so, they begin to, again, suspect that, perhaps, it was because the doctors were killing people with cholera, or the things they were doing, or whatever, so that they could use their bodies for dissection. Um, which I think is very interesting, 'cause I've seen a lot of people say like, y'know, uh, people who are put on ventilators are way more likely to die

than people who aren't. And there's been this misconception that ventilators are killing people, when, in fact, the sicker you are, the more likely you are to go on a ventilator.

Justin: Right, right, right.

Sydnee: And same thing. The patients that were being sent to the cholera hospitals were the sickest patients. The patients that stayed home were not as sick as the patients who went to the hospital.

So y'know, you see... all of this, the reason I bring all this up, is that because of all this, when the citizens were faced with a crisis, with something they didn't understand, and they felt disconnected from their leaders, they felt like... they were treated less than, they didn't trust the doctors in the medical establishment.

Because the doctors, y'know, at that point, a lot of the medical attitude towards people when it came to dissection was kind of like a sneering kind of like... These uneducated fools don't understand that what we're doing will help them in the long run. When we dissect bodies, we learn. We become better at being doctors, and then we provide better care for them, and they're too stupid to get that.

And that kind of arrogance created this huge divide. And then, when they were faced with needing to work together and trust the medical professionals in the community to help them through this crisis, people didn't trust them.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And there were multiple riots throughout the next couple weeks. It, y'know, eventually, it would end when the government had to step in and...

Justin: Take off everybody's hats, one at a time.

Sydnee: [laughs] No. I don't think there were any—there were any, uh... there was no czar to step in and stop everything.

Justin: Maybe that's why West Virginia has a COVID czar. So at some point, someone can tell everybody to take off their hats.

Sydnee: Oh my gosh, I didn't think about that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: We do have a COVID czar.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But anyway, so, eventually, the riots would stop, as... in the—I mean, the big thing that happened is that the outbreak subsided. Cholera kind of burned through different areas quickly, and then would end, and y'know... that would be the end of it.

Um, the police were a big feature in these riots ending in Liverpool, and that's always one tough thing, is when the only way to end something is to like... like, uh, strong military or police, or kind of... um, authoritarian presence... it doesn't necessarily ally the people with you.

Justin: It doesn't kill the idea, either. It kind of reinforces it.

Sydnee: So the rioting may have stopped, but the distrust persisted. Now, the anatomy act, as we've talked about the show before, which allowed pathways for doctors to legally obtain bodies for dissection, would follow this. And that would somewhat calm this. Except, at the same time, there was still this belief, like the doctors have just found a way to legalize murder. [laughs]

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And so, it didn't really fix all these problems. And I think all of this is interesting to look at today, because when we see, um... I mean, I think

for a lot of us, especially in the medical community, when you see footage of like, protesters yelling at like, the... I think they were a group of nurses standing in front of one hospital, and like, yelling in their faces and accusing them of being part of this conspiracy, of wanting to hurt people. I think somebody yelled, like, "You're the virus. You're the problem."

It's so disheartening and it's so upsetting, and it can feel like... I have no idea why this would happen. But I think if you step back and kind of look at the whole situation, then maybe we can understand why these beliefs flourish. Why people are so misled. And then, if we can address that—those root reasons... that's better than just forcing people. Y'know?

Justin: Mm-hmm. Or writing people off as rubes or dummies or...

Sydnee: Right. Um, and I think—I think the number one thing is, leadership that speaks with one voice that is backed by science and backed by evidence and backed by compassion is the best way to get that message across.

Justin: Well, we ain't gonna do that, so what else you got? [laughs]

Sydnee: I—well, I will say this. For me, this is how it's manifested very personally. I uh... saw someone post some misinformation on the internet. Uh, some very, um... angry against doctors, uh, to the extent that like, if you believe these things about doctors, could incite violence against doctors type misinformation.

And instead of responding as like, you're such an idiot, this is so stupid, I can't believe you would believe this. Here are all the reasons this is so clearly a lie.

I responded by saying... I understand that, y'know, the medical system we have in this country has created, at times, a very contentious relationship between doctors and patients. It's very unfortunate, but because we put so many things in between doctors and patients, insurance companies and pharmaceutical companies, and hospital administration, and all these other

things... that relationship is not all it could be for a lot of people. I understand that.

And because of that, you may have a natural, like, distrust of what our motivations are. And I get that that could exist. But if you'd ever like to talk, I would love to talk through that with you, because I'm part of that system, and I understand all of its problems and flaws and downfalls, and we probably agree on a lot of the things that could be done to fix it. If we could talk about it.

Justin: Now, I don't know who this friend was that posted this initially, so I'm taking a shot in the dark, here. But was your diplomacy in this situation, in any part, motivated by the fact that you might have to see this person, say, around Thanksgiving time?

Sydnee: [laughs] I—I refuse to answer that question. I'm just saying that... sometimes, it can be really hard, and right now, I think there are a lot of people who are... who are sources of misinformation, who stand in positions of authority, that make it really hard for people to see that it's misinformation. Like, if it's coming from there, it can't—it can't all just be lies.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: And so, I think that... and these people are afraid, and they want positive answers. They want to believe that it's not that bad, or that the vaccine's coming out tomorrow. They want to believe this stuff. And so, it's hard to just say, well, it's not true, because the truth is a lot more comfortable. Which is a lot of, we're not sure, we don't know, maybe, possibly. You should still stay inside. You should still wear a mask. You should—y'know, things that we don't want to hear.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so, maybe if we can kind of understand all this, and meet people where they are... I mean, ultimately, that's my goal. And it's

frustrating, and it's hard, and like, maybe privately, I need to go to my bedroom and punch a pillow a few times.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: But if I can do that, and in this case, the person responded very positively to me. And if I can do that over and over again, or at least every once in a while when I have the energy... we can change things. And that's the way we affect change, is not by othering. Is not by separating further. Is by connecting on things we agree on, which is that the American healthcare system is horribly broken, and does not serve everyone, or a lot of us. And needs to be completely overhauled.

Justin: It's a call—a lovely call for peace and love that I know would be shared by four young men on the streets of Liverpool, that are here to wrap up the show. John, Paul, George, and Ringo, who would go on to form The Beatles.

Sydnee: That's right. That's what ended the riots, really.

Justin: The realization that, listen, we might accidentally kill one of the Beatles' great-grandpas, and we have to be more careful.

Uh, thank you so much for listening to our program. We hope you enjoyed yourself. Uh, we are certainly thrilled that you are here. Thank you so much to the Taxpayers for the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program, and...

Sydnee: Uh, Justin, I want to thank somebody.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yvette sent us a bunch of masks. A bunch of homemade cloth masks. And I wanted to thank Yvette for sending us those masks.

Justin: I love it. Wore one today.

Sydnee: That's right! I want to encourage everybody. Every time you go out in public, you should still be wearing masks.

Justin: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Sydnee: Make sure that that is still important. That anybody, again, we talked about it last time. Anybody who is saying that that doesn't matter, it's not helpful or dangerous, no. You should still be wearing masks. Please wear masks. Please social distance. Please wash your hands.

Justin: And hang in there.

Sydnee: Hang in there.

Justin: Hang in there.

Sydnee: We're gonna get through this. We just have to work together.

Justin: Uh, that is gonna do it for us for this week, so 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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