

## Sawbones 337: Vagina Shaming

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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:** And Syd, the clock—the countdown has begun. Our DoorDash order of burritos is just one half hour away. Can we, in one half our, fix whatever problem you're about to bring to my attention, solve all the world's issues with this issue, and finally fix it for good?

**Sydnee:** No. This is an issue that has existed for a very, very long time, and I do not believe that I have the ability, or power, or even all of the knowledge to solve it right now. But I do wanna share it with everyone.

**Justin:** And you will try to keep it to a round 30 minutes—

**Sydnee:** I'll do my best.

**Justin:** —because your boy... needs burritos.

**Sydnee:** —[crosstalk] that you're hungry. I, uh—we're a little late this week on our episode because I am on hospital service, and that makes me a little busier than usual. I was all ready, it was just finding the time to record.

But we, uh—before I left work today I said, "Okay, I gotta go record a podcast, I'll see you guys later." And my residents, some of 'em listened and they were like, "Hey, what are you doin' your show on?"

And... I couldn't—I didn't know how to explain at work what I was gonna do our show on. Uh, because of—the inspiration is not exactly a music video that I could... is—is not appropriate for the workplace environment, let's say.

**Justin:** Hmm, depending on your workplace, I guess.

**Sydnee:** Uh... I guess. I guess that's true. [laughs quietly] But generally speaking, you just don't talk about... sex, [holding back laughter] in the workplace.

**Justin:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Just don't!

**Justin:** Yeah. Yeah, you probably just don't.

**Sydnee:** Just don't.

**Justin:** It's probably better to not.

**Sydnee:** Uh, and there will be some talk about—I should say that at the top of this episode. We're gonna—we're gonna talk a little bit about S-E-X. [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** [laughs] You're spelling it *now*?!

**Sydnee:** And—[laughs] uh—

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** —and about body parts, and—and genitalia. And I always seek to do so in an appropriate, doctorly, scientific fashion. But—

**Justin:** However, I get *raunchy*, so—

**Sydnee:** Well, no. We are not gonna get raunchy. But because it is that sort of material, I know that some families listen to the show.

**Justin:** So if you're not ready to—

**Sydnee:** I believe in having these conversations with your kids, but it—you're not always ready—I mean, I got a six-year-old. I don't know if I'm ready for this conversation with her.

**Justin:** It depends—but it really depends on how raunchy your kids are.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** If your kids like to get raunchy and they love wild blue humor, in a kind of, like... you know... Jack Butt, um, you know, that kind of—

**Sydnee:** Jack Butt, uh-huh.

**Justin:** —wild, raunchy, *South Park* humor. Like, that's what we're gonna be getting into. That's what I'm gonna be bringing, at least.

**Sydnee:** I told—I told them, without getting into anything, I said that I want to talk about the topic of vagina shaming, and I was inspired by some internet reaction to a recent song, music video, released by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion.

And when I said that, the medical students cracked up, 'cause they knew what I was talking about, and the residents looked clueless, 'cause they're too busy to know what's happening in the world around them. But it—it—that passes.

Justin, have you heard the song? Have you seen this video?

**Justin:** No. Should I put my headphones and listen while you're explaining it, just so I can get a lay of the land?

**Sydnee:** No...

**Justin:** I'll sort of react live, it's fine.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] I don't think that's necessary. Um—

**Justin:** I'll just go ahead and start playing it—

**Sydnee:** Here's—

**Justin:** —check it out.

**Sydnee:** —here's the thing. Uh, the—okay, so the—the song is called, in case you haven't heard it—uh, it's, like, capital W-A-P. I have heard people pronounce it Wop, or Wap. [holding back laughter] I—I think I will refrain from explaining it. Uh, what they—what they stand for.

Um, but the thing is... I think it's a good song. It's musically impressive and, uh, the whole thing is—it's supposed to be fun, and raunchy, and a little sexy, and—or a lot sexy.

And it is—I mean, it is that. It's—it's—it's fun. And it's the kind of thing that, like, I probably wouldn't watch with my six-year-old, 'cause there would be a lot of things to explain that, uh, I don't know she is quite ready for, although once she is I'll talk to her about it.

Um, but it really got to some people! It really upset some people. And, um, I... I can imagine why. I think there are multiple reasons. Justin, could you maybe guess why some people got so upset by this? The song itself, the music video, the combination, the whole thing.

**Justin:** Well, uh—I mean, there's a lot of reasons. One is, um, it's two Black women owning their own sexuality, which our culture is completely intolerant of.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** Um, so I would say that that's probably a big part of it. And I guess, you know, to a lesser degree, probably just women in general owning their own sexuality is not, uh... you know, tends to ruffle some less, um... ruffle feather—boy, I'm really tryin', Syd! I'm tryin'—

**Sydnee:** No, I think—I think—I don't know.

**Justin:** —I don't wanna say wrong things.

**Sydnee:** I don't have a—I don't have a problem with saying that. I think some of the criticism that was leveled at this has strong—either racist, misogynist, or both, undertones. I don't think there's anything wrong with making that statement.

Um, I'm not saying everyone who didn't enjoy it has those inclinations. I think everyone's allowed to like and not like whatever music they want.

Uh, but if you're gonna take to the internet or your podcast or Twitter or whatever, um... [laughs quietly] to complain about it and make it a bigger cultural deal, um, you better have some explanation for why this bothers you so much as opposed to all of the other ways we discuss and celebrate sex in our culture.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** And other body parts.

**Justin:** We like... uh, the boys to get raunchy. We don't like people with vaginas to get raunchy.

**Sydnee:** So we like penises to get raunchy.

**Justin:** We like raunchy penises.

**Sydnee:** Is that what you're trying to say? Okay. Uh, specifically Ben Shapiro and Tucker Carlson got really mad about it—

**Justin:** Boo, I don't want to talk about them!

**Sydnee:** I'm—well, I mean, the—Ben—Ben Shapiro—

**Justin:** That's offensive. That's—

**Sydnee:** —Ben Shapiro is the reason that we have to explain some of this stuff, because, uh—okay. So... [laughs quietly] Tucker Carlson said the usual stuff that—I mean, he's a jerk. The usual stuff he says. Ben Shapiro's thing is—in case you don't know, he's very famous for talking faster than he can think.

So... he talked about, uh, this video in regard to—I guess he read the lyrics. I did not listen to this. He read the lyrics to the song on his show.

**Justin:** Well, that's—of course you're gonna lose some of the term—[wheeze-laugh]—like, that's not—that's not the ideal venue.

**Sydnee:** And then he tweeted about the fact that he is concerned about the medical conditions, um, which these women in this video might have, if they necessitate a bucket and a mop—

**Justin:** [snorts]

**Sydnee:** —for their degree of vaginal lubrication. And he credited this observation to his, quote, "doctor wife."

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Which, by the way, there was a time where you used to call me doctor wife.

**Justin:** Yeah, it was before you—before we did *Sawbones* or any shows together, so it wasn't—I didn't want to, like, talk about... I don't know. It seemed weird to violate your privacy by, like, talking about—you know, naming you and stuff like that. It wasn't, like, a secret. It was just—

**Sydnee:** No, I used to find it kind of endearing when you called me that. Now, I—you can never call me that again. It's lost its charm.

**Justin:** Haven't for a while, to be fair, but yes.

**Sydnee:** No, it's lost its charm. Uh, but he includes in his differential—which I assume came from his doctor wife—a yeast infection, trichomoniasis, and bacterial vaginosis, as reasons for vaginal lubrication.

Now, before we get into this idea that we need to police vaginas, shame vaginas, talk publicly about what vaginas should and shouldn't do, or look like, or smell like, or whatever, uh, first—if right now you're screaming, "Why does anyone have time to be worried about this?!" I understand. [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** Absolutely. [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** And if you need to talk a minute to scream that, I understand. But some people were worried about it, and there's a long history of people taking to whatever—I guess if it was just a soapbox on a corner, they could've done that too—to shout about what vaginas are supposed to be like.

**Justin:** [muffled laughter]

**Sydnee:** And I think we should address some misconceptions. Is Ben correct that vaginas should be dry?

**Justin:** [snorts quietly]

**Sydnee:** Always be dry?

**Justin:** I don't think so.

**Sydnee:** So... first of all—[laughs] if you don't have a vagina, you may not know that this is a problem. [pauses] That people with vaginas are constantly getting messages about what vaginas should be like, and have for a very long time.

Uh, there are all kinds of magazine articles, wellness blogs—there are, uh, I would say, lots of, whether intentional or not, subtler messages from friends when you're growing up, from family members—well-meaning, maybe, family members, who were told the same things by their family members growing up, and so pass along some weird ideas about what that specific genitalia is supposed to be like.

Um, I would say that this probably does occur for people with penises. Messages about what a penis should be.

**Justin:** Ye—I mean... s—yeah, sort of, I guess, yeah.

**Sydnee:** I mean, I'm not gonna say that people with penises have never experienced genital shaming.

**Justin:** I just don't wanna try to compare—I mean, I was thinking, in my lifetime, I have... you know, there's definitely, like, you get—you get—there's discussion. Certainly more in the middle school sort of era.

**Sydnee:** Right, right. I'm just saying, I don't think that this is completely unique to people with vaginas, but I do think there is a much more, uh, widespread, ingrained cultural history of this for people with vaginas.

**Justin:** There's also a lot less specificity, I think, about what makes... [through laughter] a great peni—[wheezes]

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** —[through laughter] what makes a great—a standout, iconic penis!

**Sydnee:** Justin's book about what makes a great penis [through laughter] will be coming out next month.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, so the word "vagina," which actually is kind of newer—the word itself, vagina, really only dates back to, like, the 1600's. There was a long time where there really wasn't a word for... that genitalia.

**Justin:** Seems healthy.

**Sydnee:** Um, the word itself comes from the Latin for sheath, as in the sheath for a sword.

**Justin:** I'm sorry! Okay? I get it! It's been going on a long time. I'm sorry. Again. About the whole thing, everybody... with a vagina. I'm sorry about the whole thing.

**Sydnee:** In the ancient Greco-Roman world, everything down there was kind of referred to by, like, the same thing. Like, your vulva, your uterus, all of it was just sort of the same word. And this isn't very different from now. Here's an interesting question for you. Do you know what part of the genitalia is the vagina?

**Justin:** [quietly] Oh my gosh. Don't... that's not fair to me, honestly. You know I love this game. The "How dumb is Justin?" game. You know that it's one of my favorite *Sawbones* games.

**Sydnee:** To be fair, I—I did not see the episode. I cannot support that. But you know the *Goop* show with Gwyneth Paltrow?

**Justin:** I know of it.

**Sydnee:** Apparently she did an episode about vaginas and was not clear on this distinction herself.



**Justin:** Yeah. Like, better than Gwyneth Paltrow at health stuff is, like, my—my lowest possible bar!

**Sydnee:** I'm just saying that there is—and I would say this is true for people with vaginas and people without vaginas, that it is not made clear what part of the genitalia is the vagina.

**Justin:** Let me say this. I hope I'm in the right quadrant. Like, I think I basically know—if I am va—if I am off by feet, I am very unnerved.

**Sydnee:** The external part is actually called the vulva, and I—for those of you who know this you're going, "Yes, I know this." But there are a surprising number of people who don't realize that the vagina is the—the passage. The inside part. The external part is called the vulva. That is not the vagina. But vagina tends to be used as a catch all term for all that down there.

Uh, which I think is because of this, like, air of mystery that has always engulfed that genitalia, that part of the pelvis. If there was not a penis present it was kind of like, "I don't know what all that other stuff is."

Uh, there were beliefs in the ancient world that people who had vaginas were thought to have more moisture in their body in general, and less heat. Because if you had less moisture and more heat, then you would've... grown...

**Justin:** [hesitantly] Grown a penis?

**Sydnee:** ... a penis? Gotten a penis? Been gifted a penis.

**Justin:** They didn't think through that one, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, but because of this, all of your organs sort of stayed inside. Like, crammed up in there, instead of dropping down to what was considered the perfect state. The final... evolution. [laughs quietly] Of the—of the Pokémon that is our genitalia.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Is the penis. And the scrotum.

**Justin:** [gasping laughter]

**Sydnee:** The v—[laughs] the—

**Justin:** [croaking]

**Sydnee:** —the vulva, the vagina—

**Justin:** [cough-laughs]

**Sydnee:** —the uterus, the ovaries, all of that was, like, a lesser stage... of evolution.

**Justin:** Can I just—do you mind if I text Griffin while we're recording and ask?

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** 'Cause I feel like he would've had a really good Pokémon name for the final evolution. Do you mind if I just text him while we're recording, and I'll just drop it—okay.

**Sydnee:** You can just—you can just text him that.

**Justin:** I'll just let it—I'll just ask him, and then I'll just say it out of nowhere.

**Sydnee:** Basically, the idea is that the vagina was an inverted penis, and the uterus was an internal scrotum. Again, these—

**Justin:** Not accurate, I'm betting.

**Sydnee:** —I don't think I—no. I was gonna say, I don't think I need to clarify that these beliefs were not right. Uh, and I—I have no comment on the concept of perfect genitalia. I think whatever genitalia makes you feel good is the perfect genitalia for you, and one is not inherently better than the other.

**Justin:** They're just different.

**Sydnee:** They're just different.

**Justin:** They're just different.

**Sydnee:** Uh, all of them. In every—in every variety. Now, Galen specifically in reference to this said if you're trying to, like, compare different genitalia—and I should note, too, when we're talking about references to genitalia in the ancient sense, a lot of the times they are using gendered terms for penises or vaginas that, uh, I would not use today, and also are not... accurate.

It is more accurate to talk about people with penises and people with vaginas than it is to talk about the word "woman" as synonymous with a person with a vagina, which is not true.

**Justin:** You know what's funny? We've—very early in *Sawbones*, we were not particularly good or responsible about that, using the proper terminology, and it felt a little bit—when we became aware of it, it felt like an encumbrance, kind of, to try to remember, just to try to remember. But now, at this point, I feel like it adds a degree of, like, specificity that's really helpful. Like, it's very—

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm. Well, it's more accurate, yeah.

**Justin:** It's more accurate and it's, like—like, I think it makes—it actually makes these discussions, like, easier to—you know, easier to have.

**Sydnee:** And it takes a small amount of effort to make sure that everyone is recognized and seen, and—

**Justin:** Encumbrance sounds terrible. I feel so terrible about the honesty with which I just said that, 'cause I'm a straight white dude, but it's just—

**Sydnee:** I—I think it's—no, that honesty is important.

**Justin:** —it was just hard to make myself remember, but now it's just a lot easier.

**Sydnee:** But that honesty is important, because it can feel that way, and then once you do it you realize, "Oh, I—this is—this is an easy thing, and the result is worth it, always." So.

Uh, but Galen said, "Turn outward the woman's, turn inward, so to speak, and fold double the man's, and you will find the same in both in every respect." So you just—

**Justin:** Basically Galen said it's the same thing, it's just different shapes.

**Sydnee:** Just folded in or out.

**Justin:** [quietly] Like origami.

**Sydnee:** Fold double the man's. That sounds like it would not feel good.

**Justin:** [quietly] Bad.

**Sydnee:** Uh... so, anyway, because of all the excess moisture that it was thought that people with vaginas had—and I'm not talking about, like, whether or not your vaginal area is wet. I am talking about, like, the entire—this was in, like, the h—the idea of humors, and people had dispositions that were either dry or wet or cold or hot dispositions.

And so the idea that some people have excess moisture, were just wet people, was considered, like, a reason for disease, and something that you could fix by making them drier. And there were foods that were wet or dry, and—we've talked about this.

But, um, people with vaginas were thought to be sort of, like, wet and squishy all over. Like, all of them was too wet. That's why—and this maybe have been a reference to different, um, ways that, like, adipose tissue was distributed throughout the body. The idea that these bodies were softer, moister.

And as a result, the necessitated menses to get that out, to get rid of some of that. Um, so none of this was analogous—

**Justin:** What's menses, in case people don't know?

**Sydnee:** Oh, I'm sorry. Menstruation, a period.

**Justin:** [quietly] Okay.

**Sydnee:** Uh—

**Justin:** [holding back laughter] I mean, I know—you know—you know *I* know.

**Sydnee:** You know. [laughs quietly] And this all ties into the practice of vaginal steaming. This practice has been, depending on who's trying to sell it to you, has

been credited to ancient Chinese medical practices of, like, what was called moxibustion, which is when you burn mugwort at various points on your body to produce different kinds of health effects.

It was also traditionally practiced in Thailand, in Mozambique, in South Africa, among other places. The Greeks were also into vaginal steaming. And you can see where this idea of, like, some sort of warm steam could help get rid of all this... wetness that you have.

**Justin:** Seems counterintuitive, actually, to me.

**Sydnee:** And the fact that you're cold, too. That was the other thing. If you were hotter, then you would have a penis.

**Justin:** Perfect, yeah. Makes perfect sense.

**Sydnee:** Um, somebody's going to hear that sentence [through laughter] and— and put it somewhere out of context, and it's gonna sound very strange.

**Justin:** A lot of opportunities for that so far this week, Syd.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Um, in those steaming concoctions by the way, usually, like, human or cow urine would be involved. The way to—what are you gonna put there to, you know, burn so that you could generate the steam for your vagina?

Um, sometimes wine was involved. There were also, like disemboweled animals stuffed with herbs that you could then—

**Justin:** Pleasant. How pleasant.

**Sydnee:** —gently burn to steam your vagina. None of this is a good idea. Please don't steam your vagina.

**Justin:** I actually guessed that.

**Sydnee:** Uh, and this all speaks to this central idea. If you're thinking about all this, like, these different things you could do to your vagina, or problems with the vagina, then it hits you that this idea that vaginas naturally are dirty or broken or messed up or in some way imperfect—

**Justin:** Needs fixing.

**Sydnee:** —yes. Uh, leads you to all this extra care and maintenance, because they're already not the ideal. A penis. So, if you can't have a penis, you're gonna have to do some extra stuff down there to keep it... healthy. And eventually that would morph into, "And attractive to others."

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Now, we have done some shows on, like, fertility and birth control and those kinds of things, and we've talked about, like, some really awful things that people have done to the vagina throughout history for those specific issues. Um, I wanna focus more on things we've done to just try to, like, make the vagina, in its natural state, quote, unquote "better." Not really addressing those issues.

Um, douching was one of the most popular for a long time.

**Justin:** Ooh, you should be around Sydnee when a douche ad comes on TV.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** Doesn't happen as much as it used to, but hatchi matchi, this one. Woo!

**Sydnee:** Douching—

**Justin:** Spicy!

**Sydnee:** —[laughs] douching was originally a form of birth control—or thought to be a form of birth control, I should say. It does not work as birth control. It was also used to prevent infection, sexually transmitted infection specifically. It doesn't work for that either. Um, but that is why people started doing it. Uh, then Lysol came around in the early 1900's.

[pauses]

**Justin:** Oh no...

**Sydnee:** And in addition to stopping pregnancy, it was advertised to fight odors. Now, if you're gonna step back and say, "Wait. Are you trying to tell me that people would douche with Lysol?"

**Justin:** No.

**Sydnee:** Yes. People—

**Justin:** Oh...

**Sydnee:** —used Lysol as a—it was sold as a douche. It wasn't—it wasn't off label. It was on the label. It is a Lysol douche for people with vaginas to use to prevent pregnancy and to keep things fresh.

**Justin:** Oh no.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** It doesn't even seem healthy.

**Sydnee:** It wasn't. It did cause damage. It caused pain, and people were told it was fine and to keep doing it anyway. Uh, throughout the 1920's and 1930's, a lot of feminine care products were developed.

**Justin:** It's weird that we have to start saying "19's" there, isn't it?

**Sydnee:** I know. [laughs quietly] That's true.

**Justin:** That's weird to think about. It's the 20's again.

**Sydnee:** And again, feminine care or feminine hygiene is generally the name that you'll see given to this category of products. Once again, this is a gendered term that is not accurate, but a lot of these products are unnecessary, so...

**Justin:** [stammering] Well, yeah!

**Sydnee:** Just to throw that in.

**Justin:** [laughs] Just leave 'em in the—in the—in the trash bin of history anyway.

**Sydnee:** Yes. Uh, and the idea is that they were aimed at things like scenting and freshening the vagina. So, like, when we first developed panty liners, the earliest pads that were available, they would make them, like, flowery scented

and that kind of thing. Um, wipes and things that you could make stuff smell better. Of course, douches.

And it was sort of like we realized as tampons and pads became a thing, because we're looking at the same era where, like, we moved from when someone was having a period they had to wear, like, those belts that would strap on to the pad and all this. Which were probably very uncomfortable and limiting as to what you could do with them.

As we move into tampons and pads that you could take with you and, like, people become more mobile and are able to, like, continue to work or do whatever, be out in the world while they are on their periods, I think it dawned on a lot of marketers that, well, you could sell lots of things, then, to these people, that have to do with their genitalia.

This is a whole area where we could make a lot of money. And it all fit nicely into this narrative. This is inferior genitalia. It inherently needs work. We like to make money. We will sell you things for it.

**Justin:** Hmm. Accessories.

**Sydnee:** Accessories for your vagina. And things took off from there.

**Justin:** Like what?

**Sydnee:** I'm gonna tell you, right after we go to the billing department.

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[ads play]

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**Justin:** Sydnee, if I remember correctly, you were about to horrify me with more vaginal mistreatment.

**Sydnee:** So, the big thing is that a lot of these products, even though they were—they would offer you all these other benefits with, like, scent and things. Uh, supposed benefits, I should say. The core reason they existed was for birth control, in a lot of cases, especially the douche.



Um, then we realized how to, like, actually make birth control... [laughs quietly] that worked. That was real. And so—and we realized that douching has never worked. We don't know—maybe we knew it didn't, maybe we didn't know, but why did we ever recommend it?

Um, and so the people who—the douche sellers... [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** And douche marketers had to come up with a different message.

**Justin:** *The Douche Seller* sounds sounds like a very, uh, unenjoyable BBC miniseries, doesn't it?

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] So, how do we get people to continue to buy douches for their vaginas, now that they know that they're not gonna keep them from becoming pregnant?

So, how about instead we say, you know, "Your husband could be leaving you, or cheating on you, because you aren't clean enough... down there. And there's only one way to fix that."

**Justin:** Classic advertising thing, right? Like they talk about on *Mad Men* a lot. Like, advertising is really creating—it's creating a want, which is basically creating guilt or shame that can only be fixed by a product.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. And in the early marketing it was very much tied to this, like—to a heterosexual marriage, because the idea that people were having sex outside of marriage would not have been spoken of—

**Justin:** Well, you're already right on the line by talking about vaginas anyway—

**Sydnee:** Exactly.

**Justin:** —so it's gotta be very focused on the family. [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** So it was very much an ad aimed at, uh, a wife. And the idea was, you—he would like it if you were as fresh as you were the day you met. That was very—that was always the underlying... "Make your genitalia the way it was... on

your wedding night." [laughs quietly] Was—I know how gross this is. It is! It's very gross! It's all very gross.

**Justin:** Everybody remembers what their partner's vagina was like on their wedding night. [holding back laughter] They're just chasing that—that memory.

**Sydnee:** It's funny, 'cause you see things, like, evolve, as we move into, like, uh, some more of the women's liberation movement, and you get different messages into, like, the 70's, where you have, like, some—again, it's all very—it's all very heteronormative. But you get, like, a man and a woman who are very clearly supposed to look like—kind of like hippies. And he's like, uh, "I always love... the way she is down there, but she knows that I really love the smell of apricots."

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** And it's like, "[groans loudly]" [laughs]

**Justin:** It's like hanging a frigging air freshener down—like, "I love his car, but I love it the most when it's got those little trees in there."

**Sydnee:** It was like—[laughs] it was like—they had to evolve as, like, sexual empowerment evolved and feminism and all this, so, like, let's evolve with that to a different way of shaming that's subtler, so that they don't catch on.

**Justin:** "Own your sexuality by making your vagina smell like mango sparkleberry." [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** Exactly.

**Justin:** Got it.

**Sydnee:** Um, keep—keep your business fresh for your sexually empowered experiences, in or outside of a marriage. [laughs quietly] But again, still only heterosexual, you know, is represented in any of this advertising.

Um, but never mind that all these messages are wrong, that the whole idea, you know, is of course wrong, that vaginas inherently are dirty or unclean or unfresh or smelly. It's all degrading and wrong. But they just morphed that same concept to appeal to people as culture shifted.

Um, eventually doctors would get on board with the idea that these products were harmful, with the realization that, like, the vagina is self-cleaning. The vagina does not need to be cleaned out.

And again, this is why, you know, terminology really is important. Because if we're talking about our vulva, which is external, and just as, like, when you're taking a bath or a shower it is important to clean your body that has contact with the outside world or could get dirty or sweaty or whatever, and so it is important to occasionally clean yourself, the vulva is external. The vagina is internal. It does not need to be cleaned.

**Justin:** Your body's handling it.

**Sydnee:** Yes. The vagina is self-cleaning. And it has a specific pH, and it does not need to be messed with, and it certainly doesn't need to be scented, and all of these products could be harmful.

In addition to your normal vaginal flora, there is—there are bacteria that are supposed to be there, that are good, and that should grow, and going and trying to wipe them all out with Lysol, or whatever it is, is harmful to you and your health.

Um, so, in response to that, the douchers came out with vaginal wipes, and shampoos, and sprays. Just for the external freshening. Just so that—again, the idea being—and have you ever had this idea sold to you, Justin? I would like to know. That when you are out in the world going about your day, that occasionally you need to sneak off to a bathroom so that you can wipe down your genitalia to make it fresher.

**Justin:** I think the closest parallel is the messages that we get about deodorant, right? Like, you get, you know, your—your shameful stink. [laughs quietly] And everyone on the subway hates it, and they hate you, and you need to go put on a better antiperspirant. That's the closest second. I get very little, like, messages about the way my genitalia needs to be.

**Sydnee:** That you need to sneak off somewhere and spray something in your underwear so that it smells nicer.

**Justin:** No, yeah. It's just—I mean, people will talk about it, but it's much more just an accepted cost of doing business rather than...

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** ... you know.

**Sydnee:** And it's—it's interesting, 'cause this is one—the vagina, and the shaming of the vagina—this is really not, um, aligned with one of the other, like, political end of the spectrum. Because with tampons and pads, we've seen a lot of—we've seen the rise of, like, natural products that are being sold. Like, inherently anything—all of these, uh, original pads and tampons and things that came out are bad for you, they have toxins, they will damage you.

Vaginal lubricants, there were a lot that for a while, um, specifically some very, um... I would say progressive wellness advocates with their own lifestyle websites would tell you that—[laughs quietly] uh, there are lubricants that have toxins in them and are artificial, and they'll harm you if you use them, and so don't use any of those.

Here are these very expensive, organic, natural products that you have to use, um, so that you don't accidentally, you know, damage your vagina, or disrupt your endocrine system, or whatever they come up with.

**Justin:** Whatever else, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, which is especially insulting, as a lot of advocates have pointed out. To, uh, places all over the world where just access to these products is such a problem, and so therefore, uh, the menses can be completely limiting to those people's quality of life, because they are unable to go to school, or go to work, or leave the house when they're occurring, 'cause they don't have access to these products.

To then, like, take it a step further and go, "Oh, but only use this specific natural brand that is promoted as, again, another way of shaming you for doing it wrong. Doing your vagina wrong."

And again, a lot of this damage can also get handed down. Um, I would say a lot of people, when they first learned about vaginal upkeep and maintenance—and again, I'm really talking about vulva, but everybody just uses the word "vagina" to mean the whole thing—uh, they probably learned it from a family member, from a mother or a sister, or maybe a friend, you know? Um, who told them, like,

"Ooh. Shave that." Or, "That shouldn't look that way." Or, "Oh, I always use this wipe, 'cause this makes you fresher," or whatever.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Um, and it can seem like, you know, you're well intentioned, you're trying to help somebody out, but it's because we've all fallen victim to the same cultural myth.

**Justin:** 'Cause anything that we don't talk about as a culture, there's plenty of shade for misconceptions to grow.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm. Um, *Teen Vogue* did an article—which I usually celebrate *Teen Vogue*, 'cause I think that they do a lot of good stuff. Uh, back in 2017 there was a much-publicized article about "Your Summer Vagina."

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** With the idea that in the summer, you have to do extra things to your vagina to keep it not funky. And some of the things—it's funny, 'cause if you look at the advice out of context, they tell you to do things like practice safe sex, wear sunscreen, rinse sand off of you—

**Justin:** [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** —if you have sand on you.

**Justin:** Seems intuitive, but okay!

**Sydnee:** Yeah, and that's fine. But once you involve, like, "But because you have a vagina, you have to rinse the sand off of you specially." [laughs] Like, I don't know what that has anything to do with it. And then they involve things like, "Use some vaginal wipes for bacteria. Don't wear a wet bathing suit, because it will change your vaginal pH. Uh, the heat outside will dry out your vagina."

**Justin:** Now, that would be quite a feat.

**Sydnee:** None of these things are—yeah. [laughs]

**Justin:** I don't know how that would actually work.

**Sydnee:** None of these things are true. Um, that you have to pee a lot to prevent a urinary tract infection. That's not true. I mean, please go urinate if you have to, but that is not—that is not accurate.

**Justin:** That goes for the show, too. If you need to take a break to urinate, please. Or take us with you. We don't know.

**Sydnee:** We don't know you're peeing. Um, and again, the vagina doesn't need extra care. It just needs the normal care that your whole body needs. You know, hygiene is important to everyone, with all bodies. Hygiene is valuable for all of us. [laughs quietly] It doesn't—there is no special set of hygiene rules just for the vagina, or for people who have one.

Um, and then the other part of this is not just what vaginas look like and what they smell like, but then what they do, which takes us back to the music video that inspired this whole episode. There is an idea that because vaginas are supposed to be fresh and clean in some way, that also there is a special amount of vaginal lubrication that is normal and healthy. And if you have too much, there's something wrong with you, and if you have too little, there's something wrong with you.

Um, and I think that this also gets tied into—this is probably why some of this is so pervasive. I—and correct me if I'm wrong—I suspect that the idea of too little vaginal lubrication being stigmatized is also tied to our beliefs about what it says about your partner's sexual performance.

**Justin:** That's fair, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, there is some idea that your partner is doing it wrong if you do not have enough vaginal lubrication. Um, if you use artificial lube, there's shaming. Like, "Oh—" again, "Is it your partner's fault?" Or, "What's wrong with you? Are you not—" I've heard this before. "Are you not in touch enough with yourself, with your body? Are you not in touch? [laughs quietly] Spiritually, with yourself enough? To be able to make that happen? [laughs] To generate it?"

**Justin:** [muffled laughter]

**Sydnee:** Um, and then again on the other end, there is some idea that somehow someone who has more vaginal lubrication is promiscuous, or... or dirty, or something bad.

**Justin:** Raunchier.

**Sydnee:** Yes. [laughs] Something. And that it's gross. That the idea that—"Oh, well that's too much. Now you've taken it too far."

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** "It's gross." Um, and I even read that there was something, like—that for a while there was this idea that something had developed on, like, Instagram, was it? Or one of those teen apps. [laughs quietly] For, uh, a dry panties challenge, to prove that you were clean.

**Justin:** Jeez.

**Sydnee:** Apparently this was much like our, um, perineal s—uh, sunning episode.

**Justin:** Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:** Where we learned—

**Justin:** Wait, hold. You mean—

[air horn]

**Soundboard:** Taint tanning.

**Sydnee:** Yes, that. Yes, that. Where we learned that it was really just, like, three people, and then a bunch of news articles. I think this was similar. It was, like, three people and a bunch of news articles.

Um, but I think the fact that so many people immediately believed that was true is proof that this idea that, like, the dryness of the vagina is still very much up for, like, objective perfection—how dry should it be at all times, and when is it acceptable for it to be not dry, and in those cases, how not-dry can it get before we declare a problem?

Um, I have had many pr—many conversations, in my profession as a physician, with people with vaginas, about normal vaginal discharge. There is a huge misconception that the vagina should be completely dry, right up until the moment of some sort of—maybe arousal or intimacy, and then it should immediately return to its completely dry state. This is not true.

The vagina is lined with mucosal—mucus membrane-type lining, a mucosal lining. It is naturally moist. The cervix has mucus. That is normal. It is natural. It is of different thinness throughout the menstrual cycle, so sometimes it may come out as a little bit of discharge. Sometimes it doesn't.

Uh, it is not dry for a reason. It's not supposed to be completely dry. It never is. And again, not the vulva on the outside. We're talking about the vagina. The vagina is not dry. And I think that we have this idea that any sort of discharge means a problem, and is gross and weird, and I think it traces to all this stuff we're talking about. The idea that there is a perfect genitalia, and you can't have it, or you didn't do it right, or you're broken inherently because of what's going on with you.

**Justin:** I got an exciting metaphor. Let me know how far off I am.

**Sydnee:** [holding back laughter] Okay.

**Justin:** Uh, that it's like—the vagina is like eyeballs. Right? They have to be wet all the time, or they don't work right. If they get really wet, sometimes it means your crying, but other times they get really wet and you're not crying, they just happen to get really wet for any number of reasons. But—so if you see them very, very wet, it doesn't mean you're sad.

It could mean a lot of different things. But if you see them dry, it doesn't mean you're not sad, either. Some people are a little bit sad all the time. So it's ba—you can't really tell much about how somebody feels based on their eyeball wetness. But it is important that they be wet sometime—most of—almost all the time. Just like eyeballs! Vagina's like eyeballs.

**Sydnee:** Th—this was a weird... but somewhat accurate, uh, analogy.

**Justin:** Vagina's like eyeballs! Everybody's got eyeballs.

**Sydnee:** Okay, well—okay.



**Justin:** Most—most everybody's got eyeballs. [quietly] Some people don't have eyeballs.

**Sydnee:** Not everybody has a vagina.

**Justin:** That's right, so I'm trying to explai—

**Sydnee:** Oh, okay, I got you.

**Justin:** —I'm trying to give them a... a way in, right?

**Sydnee:** I got you, okay. For people who don't. And for a lot of people who do, who are not taught this stuff.

**Justin:** Everybody!

**Sydnee:** 'Cause we don't talk about vaginas.

**Justin:** We don't even need to anymore—

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** —'cause we got eyeballs! This eyeball thing is takin' off!

**Sydnee:** So, I—I—

**Justin:** Vagina's like eyeballs. That's it.

**Sydnee:** This is when I throw out there the caveat that there are conditions that do alter these things, of course.

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** Right? Of course, of course.

**Justin:** Allergies, for one.

**Sydnee:** Uh, to address—no. [laughs] To address specifically the conditions that were in Ben's differential diagnosis, bacterial vaginosis can cause excessive discharge and an odor.

Uh, a yeast infection usually causes more of, like, a thick, white discharge. Not, like, I don't know—you would not mistake for vaginal lubrication. Probably. As well as some itching and burning. Um, trichomoniasis can cause a discharge, some odor, and some pain when you pee.

There are reasons why you could have a vaginal discharge that is abnormal, that is indicative of an illness, and that needs to be addressed. Which is why I recommend to everybody with a vagina the same thing that I would recommend to everybody not with a vagina. [laughs quietly] If there's something going on in your body that is causing you distress, go get it checked out. Please. Please do.

Please don't ever assume that something that you think and feel is a problem is normal. But sometimes, it is true that stuff you're worried might be a problem isn't, and because our culture and our society has ingrained in us that parts of our body are supposed to look a certain way or feel a certain way or smell a certain way, when really none of that is true. And I don't know that it's helpful to have, like—you know the famous vagina-scented candle?

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** Again, I don't know what it smells like. I did not purchase one. But whatever it is, okay? Well, there's *your* vagina. There are, like, lots of other vaginas that smell a lot of other different ways that are just fine.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That have no problems.

**Justin:** No problems at all.

**Sydnee:** If you think you have a problem with your vagina, please go get it checked out. If you think you have a problem with your eyeballs, please go get those checked out, too.

Um, but the implications that a wet vagina is a sick vagina is very damaging and misinformed. There are lots of wet vaginas that are perfectly healthy. If you want

or need to use vaginal lube—artificial vaginal lubricant, that is fine, and not indicative of any inherent problem. Or if you don't want or need to use vaginal lubricant, that is also fine, and not indicative of any problem.

It's a very personal thing, and all this shaming of, I think, the vagina, but also sexuality in certain members of our society, who aren't supposed to embrace or, um, explore or, you know, celebrate their own sexual power, sexual being, enjoyment of sexual activity, what their body can do, what it can allow them to feel—all of those things are normal, and quite frankly, people with penises have been celebrating it... forever?

**Justin:** Yeah, for a while.

**Sydnee:** So it's frustrating—

**Justin:** At least since the Washington Monument.

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] It—

**Justin:** At least since that.

**Sydnee:** I would say before that. It's frustrating, because—

**Justin:** Leaning Tower of Pisa? That person has some—there were some, uh, uh, uh... con—inadequacies that they were trying to work through.

[pauses]

**Sydnee:** [amused] It's very frustrating, because these reactions—

**Justin:** I was so embarrassed when it started leaning, too—“aw, no! It's not like that! No! No, no, no—nobody look!”

**Sydnee:** [laughs quietly] These reactions, uh, to this song—which, again, I enjoyed. I quite enjoyed.

**Justin:** I just listened to it. It's good.

**Sydnee:** Um, it—these reactions were largely from, like, I would say the conservative end of the spectrum. But vaginas get hit from both sides. Both the

left and the right wanna tell you what to do with your vagina, and what is a normal vagina and what it should be like and look like, and all these different things. And all of these messages are inappropriate and damaging. Um, there is no need to douche, or carry around freshening wipes with you. Um, there's no need for that.

Just like there is no need to steam your vagina, or put a jade egg inside it. Um, and all of these things can be very damaging. The best case scenario is, you're gettin' ripped off and you're gonna waste some money. But the worst case scenario is, in some of these cases, you're going to damage your body. You're going to do harm to it. Um, hygiene is hygiene for all of us. Keep yourself well.

There is no need, if you are a person with a vagina, to do special, extra, [through laughter] vaginal cleaning and maintenance, uh, that it isn't already doing for itself. And I think that whole aisle, which is still called the feminine hygiene aisle, or feminine care aisle... I'm sorry. There are—I mean, not everyone. 'Cause, like, there are menstrual products there. But almost every single product could be wiped out, and we would still be just fine.

**Justin:** There's one person that gets to decide if there's a problem with your vagina. And that's... me. No.

**Sydnee:** No. No.

**Justin:** You. Sorry. [through laughter] I messed up right at the end. I was feelin' good about it.

**Sydnee:** Well, I would say—I would say go to—go really talk to your doctor about it, because there are a lot of people I see who really have been made to feel like there's a problem with their vagina, and there isn't one.

But they've gotten so many messages—I didn't even get into, like, the whole idea of vaginoplasty to, like—if you have a v—if you're a person with a vagina, but it doesn't look the way that you think a vagina's supposed to look—like, you saw one in a movie or on TV or in a picture of a vagina that you think looks better than your vagina, and so you go have, you know, basically plastic surgery to fix your vagina to look more like those vaginas. That—that idea that there is one perfect vagina is not true. Vaginas look as many different ways as there are people who have them.

**Justin:** Like snowflakes. Um, thank you so much for listening to our program. We hope you've enjoyed yourself and learned something about vaginas. Uh, as we say every episode. That's our traditional sign off.

**Sydnee:** I like—I will say, I am very partial to the appropriate words for these things. I think vulva's fine, vagina's fine. Try out labia for a while. You know, just embrace these terms. Look at a diagram and really get to know these terms. Um, I like 'em.

**Justin:** If you want more *Sawbones*, you can go to the bookstore of your choice, uh, be it online or—I mean, preferably online. Let's say online. And, uh—

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** —and get *The Sawbones Book*. Uh, we—

**Sydnee:** A lot of local bookstores are online, too, these days, yeah.

**Justin:** Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. And you can pick up our book there. Uh, so that—there's audio, and, uh, you know, [holding back laughter] paper versions of the book.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** Thank you to The Tax—

**Sydnee:** Analog. [laughs]

**Justin:** Analog. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to the Max Fun Network for having us as a part of their family. And thank you to you, for listening. Uh, we'll be with you again next week, but until then, 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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