

Sawbones 193: Wrinkles

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[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: Well Syd, it's my birthday today.

Sydnee: No, it's not.

Justin: [sings] Happy birthday to me...

Sydnee: Honey, it's not— it's not your... it's not your birthday. That's easily discoverable information at this point. People will know.

Justin: Yeah but you—

Sydnee: It's not your birthday.

Justin: You told me the topic and we both agreed it would be a lot— it would be a very easy intro to do to the topic if it had been my birthday. So, I was just kinda going for it.

Sydnee: Right. Well, I was just gonna say something nice like Justin, you're looking youthful today.

Justin: Oh, thanks. You know it's the slow carb diet. Four pounds of eating nothing but beans and I've managed... [laughs] to lose like 20 pounds.

Sydnee: You look like a baby.

Justin: Uh, babyface.

Sydnee: You look just like a— it's like I'm sitting across from a talking baby with a full head of hair.

Justin: And a Night Trap t-shirt.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Like many babies, popular— it's a toddler size. It was hard to find in a toddler size, but—

Sydnee: You're my favorite— no. I was going to say you're my favorite baby. You're tied for my favorite baby.

Justin: Fair enough. So, that would be a good— I mean, like, I've already gotten us in. I said a bunch of words at the beginning to set the stage, and now I believe it's time for me to pull back the curtain and reveal Sydnee McElroy to tell us what the topic is this week on Sawbones.

Sydnee: Well, Justin, I thought we could talk about wrinkles.

Justin: That's so ironic because it's my birthday today.

Sydnee: Oh no, okay— we're— no.

Justin: Tied in really nicely.

Sydnee: We're not going back to that.

[squeaking sounds]

Justin: It's a squeaky chair. I gotta fix this squeaky chair biz, Syd.

Sydnee: Yeah. Or maybe just sit still. Maybe just stop fidgeting.

Justin: I'm a baby. I'm can't help but fidget.

Sydnee: [laughs] So, as a baby, you don't have a lot of wrinkles.

Justin: [laughs] Thank you. That's true.

Sydnee: I mean, not yet.

Justin: Not yet.

Sydnee: We're headed there. We're headed there. But, you know, wrinkles are— have— I don't always think of them as a medical thing, because it's, you know, it's mainly a cosmetic thing. It's not, like, a medical condition. It's not like you have to do anything about them.

But obviously the medical world has been attempting to do things about them for a very long time. So, thank you Emily and Anthony for both suggesting this topic. First of all, do you know why our skin wrinkles?

Justin: I'm gonna take a swing at it.

Sydnee: Oh, good. I always enjoy this.

Justin: Well... pretend somewhere in here I said collagen, because I think that's important.

Sydnee: Mm hmm. You're just reading ahead in my outline.

Justin: No, I'm just telling you my understanding of it. Collagen.

Sydnee: Okay, collagen.

Justin: I think that we either lose or gain collagen as we get older, and when we're very young our skin is very elastic, and then as we get older our skin becomes less elastic and repeated... actions, because of the loss and/or gain of collagen, begin to wrinkle permanently, because our faces are less pliable than they were in our youth.

Sydnee: That's actually kinda right. It's a loss.

Justin: Gonna go buy a lottery ticket—

Sydnee: You hedged your bets there and said loss or gain.

Justin: Gonna buy a lottery ticket, everybody. J-Man was 80% of the way there.

Sydnee: [laughs] So it's, I mean, that's kind of right. So, part of it is the loss of collagen and elastin over time. Elastin giving us our elasticity, so that was pretty good. Part of it was also that these fibers in our—

Justin: Elastin sounds like a made-up chemical that Elastic Man injected in himself to get his powers.

Sydnee: [laughs] It's a real thing. Broken down by elastase.

Justin: Okay. Whoa. Elastase breaks down elastin?

Sydnee: Mm hmm.

Justin: You'd think those two would get along.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: They have so much in common.

Sydnee: So, these fibers in our skin are constantly being stretched and compressed as we move our faces. Well, anything, but I think most people focus on facial wrinkles more than anything else. I mean, obviously we could be talking about any skin. But largely face is what we're focusing on.

So, as you smile and frown and laugh and shrug— or... you don't shrug your eyebrows. That's not really a thing. You raise your eyebrows. And so on and so forth, these fibers stretch and compress. And sometimes they can stretch too far, sometimes they can break, and when this happens sometimes they don't heal very well and you get some more, like, fibrous tissue in that place and things can become a little stiffer there. Other areas of the skin will become looser around it and you start to get wrinkles.

And like I said, what adds to this is the natural loss of those fibers over time. And some things make it happen faster than others, cause not everybody wrinkles at the same rate. Or to the same degree, certainly.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So, there are genetic factors that we don't completely understand as to why one person may wrinkle sooner or more so than another person.

Justin: Alright.

Sydnee: And then there are things that we know definitely contribute. Sun damage, for instance. The more sun damage to your skin, the more likely you are to get wrinkles.

Justin: Mm hmm.

Sydnee: Smoking definitely contributes to wrinkles, so—

Justin: Okay, now I had to ask this, because this I actually don't know and I feel like I'm probably wrong. Does smoking contribute to wrinkles because you're doing the same action with your face when you smoke over and over again?

Sydnee: [laughs] I'm sure that doesn't help, but no. It actually has to do with the toxins in the cigarettes.

Justin: Oh. Okay.

Sydnee: And the chemicals in the smoke—

Justin: That honestly makes more sense than my thing.

Sydnee: Yeah, no, I mean, any repetitive movement with your skin would be more likely to cause a wrinkle but that's not really, with the smoking, that's not it. But smoking, sun damage, generally poor hydration, although it'd have to be pretty poor for a long time. And then, you know, they're also just a normal part of aging. You know.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: It's like— it's like my man Jimmy Buffet says. "Wrinkles only go where the smiles have been."

Justin: That's so true.

Sydnee: You know.

Justin: That's so true.

Sydnee: That's true.

Justin: Now, my elbows. Let's talk about that, because...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] I don't know, James, on that one.

Sydnee: Do you know it's actually— it's actually a completely different mechanism from, like, when we think about age-related wrinkles to the wrinkles that you get when you've been in the bathtub too long and you get pruney?

Justin: No, I did not know that.

Sydnee: Totally different mechanism.

Justin: That has nothing to do with each other, huh?

Sydnee: No, has nothing to do— just, I stumbled across this as I was researching this, and the mechanism for that is fascinating. It's not just like your skin absorbs extra water and so it gets, like, kind of folded. It has to do with changes in blood vessels and nerve endings... it's really interesting. I'm not gonna talk about it, cause it's just an interesting thing.

Justin: That's a whole— let's not burn that show.

Sydnee: But anyway.

Justin: About getting pruney.

Sydnee: It's a whole other pathophysiology.

Justin: Does everybody call it getting pruney? That seems like it might be colloquial.

Sydnee: Uh, no, in the articles that I— the scientific articles I was reading about why does your skin get wrinkly in the bathtub they put in quotes, or "pruney", often.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So, what have we done throughout history to try to combat the scourge of wrinkles? I don't really think it's a scourge, but clearly some people do.

So, Cleopatra, obviously famous for being beautiful and seeking to maintain that beauty. Also very powerful. Probably kind of intimidating. She took daily baths in donkey milk to try to keep her skin silky smooth.

Justin: Did that work?

Sydnee: There are substances in milk that have been, like, studied to see if— like alpha-hydroxy acids of something that supposedly can keep the skin a little smoother. I don't know that it's ever actually been proven to make a significant difference in preventing wrinkles, but there are active compounds that I guess maybe would have made it feel softer or something.

Justin: Mm hmm.

Sydnee: But what I thought was interesting is to maintain her daily donkey milk baths—

Justin: [snorts] Sorry.

Sydnee: She had to have a stable of 700 donkeys.

Justin: That was a kid on Salute Your Shorts, right? Donkey Milk? Was that him?

Sydnee: [laughs] Donkey Lips.

Justin: Ah, yes, of course.

Sydnee: 700 donkeys, for her baths. That's a lot of donkeys.

Justin: It's a lot of hay, too. Like, you gotta— is that, donkeys eat hay?

Sydnee: I'm assuming.

Justin: This isn't a show about donkeys, people. Don't come to us for donkey tips.

Sydnee: In addition, and you find a lot of these among, like, royalty throughout history. Rulers who had access and time and money to-

Justin: And also, like, incentive to make people think that they were, if not immortal, then—

Sydnee: Ageless.

Justin: Yeah, ageless, exactly.

Sydnee: Sure, sure. The ruler of the Tang Dynasty, Empress Wu Zetian, would wash her face in a mixture that she called "fairy powder". Which I think sounds magical.

Justin: Magical.

Sydnee: But was really just motherwort and cold water mixed together.

Justin: Not really magical. And not a powder? Kind of a liquid.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But if you call it fairy powder...

Justin: Yeah, it sounds whimsical.

Sydnee: Sounds magical. Much less magical, both the Greeks and the Romans used to make mud masks. Specifically, if you really wanted to get rid of wrinkles, mud wasn't good enough. You should throw some crocodile dung in with the mud. Paint that on your face. Don't go out in public, cause you've got crocodile poop on your face. But wash it off, and then you'll look great.

Justin: You'll look fantastic.

Sydnee: Actually, I think they did this at, like, Roman baths and stuff. So, you would actually be in public as you were smearing croc poo on your face.

Justin: But you know what? Everybody's doing it, so you got the peer pressure thing.

Sydnee: [laughs] So it's fine.

Justin: Yeah. I guess. I mean, not fine, but it's just like, everybody's doing it.

Sydnee: Justin, if all your friends were smearing crocodile poo on their faces, would you, too?

Justin: I mean, I'd have some questions first for sure, namely where are you getting this stuff?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Did you sell this— did you buy this from somebody? Did you trade them magic beans for it?

Sydnee: Are you sure it's crocodile poo? Maybe you were ripped off.

Justin: Are you sure it's croc— did you watch the crocodile do it?

Sydnee: Galen made his own mixture, it was kind of like the original cold cream, with beeswax, olive oil and water. So, that's a little nicer.

Justin: That's fine, I guess.

Sydnee: Yeah, that's fine.

Justin: That might be... that might kinda work, right?

Sydnee: I mean, what do you mean when you say work?

Justin: Fair, okay. Listen, I don't wanna get ahead of us here.

Sydnee: Because remember, there are lots of ways that you could moisturize your skin and it would look, you know, fresher or smoother immediately after you did something, but what people were also attempting to do is eliminate or prevent wrinkles. And that's a whole other matter than just, "Oh, your skin looks so shiny right now."

Pliny, of course, Pliny the Elder— we haven't talked about him for a while. I'm glad he's back.

Justin: Yeah, I've been missing that fool.

Sydnee: Pliny the Elder had his own, his own theory on how to get rid of wrinkles, and it is, of course, awful.

Justin: Yeah, rub... well, I mean, I'm not even gonna guess, because his will be worse than whatever crap I make up.

Sydnee: Mm hmm. Take some leaves.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Steep them in the urine of a boy. Or a girl, if that's all you can find.

Justin: [laughs] What is wrong with you that you can't find— listen. I've known a lot of boys. They all will pee on whatever you want them to.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: For sure. You may not even have to ask.

Sydnee: Preferably one that's not yet adolescent. So, get the leaves, get the little boy to pee on them, then pound them with saltpetre and just, like, kinda paste them all over your abdomen. And you won't have wrinkles!

Justin: There? I mean, just, is it an abdomen-specific treatment, or...

Sydnee: No.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Just in— it's just Pliny, he just makes it up!

Justin: Yeah, he just makes it up, you're right.

Sydnee: There you go. In the 1400s, they had an interesting theory on what, in France, on what they thought caused wrinkles. Specifically, chewing. Now, that's not— again, movements—

Justin: So just stop that, and...

Sydnee: Movements of the facial muscles, repetitive movements over time, yeah, yeah that tends to be places where we wrinkle. Which is why we see them around the corners of our mouth or, you know, above our forehead. Those kinds of places where the face has more movement.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Chewing is probably still worth it, I would say.

Justin: I think in the— [laughs] If you're looking at the grand scope. If you zoom out a little bit, I think that you would see that chewing is probably still worth it.

Sydnee: [laughs] The result was that many fine women and noblewomen, women of royalty, would only eat soup, to avoid chewing all the time. So, you could just sip daintily on your soup and not use those chewing muscles.

Justin: [laughs] I mean...

Sydnee: That's why I stay so wrinkle-free, is my love of soup. [laughs]

Justin: You do eat a lot of soup.

Sydnee: I do love soup. It's my favorite food.

Justin: You like a nice soup.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: You like more of a chunky-style soup, though. I'm not sure this would pay off for you.

Sydnee: [laughs] That's true. That's the most boring thing, by the way, anyone could ever say. "My favorite food is soup." [laughs]

Justin: It is. It is.

Sydnee: I'm sorry. That's who you've been listening to, everybody, my favorite food is soup.

Justin: Her favorite food is soup. The Sydnee McElroy Story.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: An 8-part special event, coming to HBO. My Favorite Food is Soup.

Sydnee: [laughs] We've mentioned the use of lead before. Specifically just because there was this time in the 1500s where a pale face was thought to be very beautiful, and something that you would try to replicate, to make your skin as pale as possible. So, lead and vinegar and to create— they would use these different pastes to create, like, this white facial kind of paint.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That you would just put over your face, that would leave it pale and smooth and kind of expressionless.

Justin: Kind of shellac it down.

Sydnee: Exactly. I mean, that's what they were kinda doing. And the result of this was two-fold. One, you would have that kinda weird, porcelain doll face. And then, two—

Justin: It drives the boys crazy.

Sydnee: [laughs] That's what everybody goes for. And then, two, you couldn't really move your facial muscles once you did. I mean, you could, but you would crack the paint if you did. So, you had to keep your face very still. Which also had the double purpose of trying to reduce the formation of wrinkles, because you can't move your face.

Justin: [laughs] Sure, yeah.

Sydnee: It was like, before Botox, you just didn't move your face.

Justin: Just don't move your face.

Sydnee: It's not that you can't, you just don't.

Justin: Just don't. Just choose not to.

Sydnee: If you didn't like that, in the same time period the women would try just putting strips of raw meat on their face.

Justin: Um, that's grody, and I don't see why that would work.

Sydnee: I mean, I'm not saying it did, I'm just saying women did it.

Justin: But people do that for black eyes, don't they?

Sydnee: Yeah...

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Hmm.

Justin: What did they know?

Sydnee: Still not a thing. I never— I have never once told a patient, “Hey, you know what you should do? Go home and grab a raw steak and slap it on that bruise.”

Justin: Yeah, that seems more of like a 1950s, Dennis the Menace kind of thing, rather than an actual thing people were doing.

Sydnee: It’s like a cartoon thing.

Justin: Also, who can afford that?

Sydnee: [laughs] Just, I mean, eat it, if you’re gonna buy a nice steak.

Justin: A nice steak. Grill that up, Dennis.

Sydnee: And then, of course, in this same— we’re moving into the same time period where you’ve probably heard of Elizabeth Báthory, the kind of, one root of some of the vampire legend.

Justin: Oh, oh, took some baths in blood.

Sydnee: Not the only— yes. Who would bathe in the blood of young virgins in order to maintain her youthful glow and her skin’s unwrinkled appearance. If you didn’t like that, you could use bat blood instead. Just kind rub bat blood all over your face. But it’s essential that if you’re gonna use this treatment, you also drink some arsenic, so.

Justin: Uh, one, yuck. Two, I thought for a second you were talking about— you said try it with bats, I thought you were talking about filling up a bathtub with bat blood. And it’s like, man, I hope you have access to a *lot* of bats.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Like, that’s way more bats than I’ve ever encount— like, caught, in my lifetime, probably.

Sydnee: I wouldn’t do that. Generally if you even come in, like, like you make a close brush with a bat, then we start talking about rabies vaccination. So, if you bathe in bat blood, you’re definitely—

Justin: I hope bats don’t have ghosts, cause that’s gotta be hard to watch. Like, “What? I died for— aw, come on!”

Sydnee: How about— bats? Let's just leave them alone.

Justin: Just leave them alone.

Sydnee: They're just up there and they're moving real quick and they're making—

Justin: They're the rats of the sky.

Sydnee: Yeah, just leave them alone.

Justin: Leave those sky-rats be.

Sydnee: In the 1600s, uncooked egg whites were pretty popular to just kinda smear all over your skin to smooth over wrinkles. And in the 1700s, wine was fashionable. Just pour wine on your face.

Justin: [laughs] Just pour wine on you face, I dunno.

Sydnee: Pour wine on your face. Which is better, because as we move into the 1800s, you see mercury was a popular treatment for everything.

Justin: Not good for you. Yeah.

Sydnee: So, why not also rub it on the surface of your skin. It was thought to remove wrinkles and blemishes, which if it was doing that, the reason would be because it was kind of corroding the skin somewhat. Not — maybe not the best way to do that.

Empress Elizabeth of Austria used to use her own concoction. It was a sperm whale wax that she mixed with sweet almond oil and rose water and then she made a cream out of it and she would put it on her face in the day, and then at night her routine involved raw veal and strawberries chopped up.

Justin: [whispers] What?

Sydnee: And she would put them on her face. And she had a specially-made leather mask that she would strap over the raw veal and strawberries.

Justin: Ugh, God.

Sydnee: And sleep in every night. [laughs]

Justin: That's profoundly upsetting!

Sydnee: I think she was a famed beauty.

Justin: I mean, I guess it was working for her. I bet that little plan was devised by someone in her court that did not enjoy her very much.

Sydnee: "Ah, you know what you need to do?"

Justin: "You know what?" [whispers] "Hey, hey, hey, look at her."

Sydnee: "Hey Liz." [laughs]

Justin: "Look at her, look at her face. Do you know what it is? Ssh, no, no, no, ssh. Don't laugh. Don't look, don't look, don't look. It's sperm whale wax."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "On her face, yeah. At night? Yeah, for sure. Veal and strawberries and a leather mask. It's baffling."

Sydnee: How do you even order that? "I need a leather mask. The kind that you would maybe put raw veal and strawberries underneath to strap to your face at night."

Justin: "Measure my face and then add, like, a steaks' worth— a veal steak's worth of space, and then a few straw—"

Sydnee: "And strawberries."

Justin: "Strawberry slits." Um, this is all very well and good, Syd, but I wanna know what we're doing today. Cause it seems like I've seen one or two treatments.

Sydnee: We're getting there. We're getting there. But before we get to today, why don't we head to the billing department?

Justin: Let's go!

[ad break]

Justin: Alright Syd, we were cruising through the 1800s, if I recall. Are we just kinda— before we get back into it, are we kinda taking crap-shots here? Is this just kind of us taking a swing at it?

Sydnee: Well, I mean, I think it's like... you know, when you're dealing with something like wrinkles, which you're gonna have such a variable response, right? Some people get really wrinkly as they get older, other people don't get particularly wrinkly.

So, you're gonna have somebody who uses one of these weird concoctions and looks great. And so, then it is thought to work, especially if they're royal or famous, then everybody's gonna wanna do whatever they did, cause they look great.

Justin: Right

Sydnee: So, it catches on and it's popular for a while, and then a new fad arises. Some of these things, there is some, some thought that maybe there was some science behind why they persisted, like I mentioned with the milk. But then, other things, I mean like the raw meat, were probably just... you know?

Justin: Just taking shots. It seems like, meat, it seems fresh? I dunno. Cold? I dunno. I really don't know.

Sydnee: Well, and I mean, the blood thing, that's gonna persist. We'll get to some modern day there.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: But stuff just sticks around, too. One of my favorite wrinkle treatments that I came across is— it's from 1889 and it's still around today. It was developed by Margaret Kroesen because she noticed that her daughter Alice had developed frown lines. Can you imagine that conversation? [laughs]

Justin: “[creepy voice] Sweetie... sweetie, we need to talk.”

Sydnee: [laughs] How rough.

Justin: “The boys won't come calling... your wrinkle lines are showing.”

Sydnee: [laughs] How rough is that?

Justin: That's the same kinda mom as, like, "Boys don't wear passes at girls that wear glasses".

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: "Marguerite." Alice, sorry, messed up her name.

Sydnee: So, poor Alice's mom said, "I need to help you get rid of these frown lines, and I need to so badly that I'm gonna create a brand new product just to eliminate— I mean wrinkles in general, but your frown lines."

Justin: Okay, like, it's so wild to me. This is still sinking in that, like, you noticed that your daughter is frowning enough that she has frown lines, and your first thought is, "I gotta get rid of those frown lines, cosmetically."

That's wild. Like, ma'am, your daughter seems profoundly upset. Like, maybe you should address some of the underlying—

Sydnee: Yeah, maybe you should ask her why she's so sad.

Justin: Yeah, your daughter's so sad.

Sydnee: She's so sad because you're mad at her for having wrinkles and you have developed a new product which are essentially— they were like these adhesive pads, they had a vegetable-based adhesive on them, and like, see-through adhesive pads, and you would just put them on your face, places that there were wrinkles. Idea being that you would sleep with them on and then wake up the next morning, and they would have mechanically smoothed the wrinkle out of your face. And she called them "Frownies".

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Which is a clever name, I have to say.

Justin: Its cute.

Sydnee: So Frownies still exist today. I didn't know this. As I read about this, I just assumed it was one of those kinda funny patent medicine things that— a lot of medicines like this that existed in like the 1800s and early 1900s and then we figured out how to actually do science and we

stopped buying them. Nope, Frownies are still around today. You can go buy them.

They are just little adhesive pads that you just stick on your face. I mean, that's what they are. Now, the company has come out with a whole line of other beauty products to try to make you look younger, but they also list — because they've been around so long, they have this long history of being used, like, in Hollywood, as "This is Hollywood's greatest secret, how do the starlets all look so young?"

Justin: Frownies.

Sydnee: "Well, it's Frownies." And if you go to their website, you can find, like, every movie they've been in. Like, "You can see Frownies in Sunset Boulevard. They're featured in a scene in Cocoon."

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: "Do you remember in Death Becomes Her when Meryl Streep uses a Frownie?"

Justin: So are you, do you leave—

Sydnee: They're in Mars Attacks. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] Can you imagine? So is Tom Jones. So, the idea was that you would leave them on, like—

Sydnee: Overnight.

Justin: Overnight, and then take them off? Or you would wear them in public?

Sydnee: Yeah, no, you don't wear— I mean, you can see 'em.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: So, you wouldn't wanna wear— I mean, I guess you could wear them all day if you wanted more effect, but no, if you were going out and about you wouldn't wanna keep wearing them.

But a lot of celebrities have and continue to buy into these. You'll see that there are all kinds of, like, celebrity endorsements, or at least people who had done them. I don't know if they're endorsements, but they're people

who have used them and said, like, “Yeah, I use Frownies, yeah I’ve tried them out.” It’s just fascinating to me. Raquel Welch included them in her book.

Justin: Oh really?

Sydnee: Raquel: Beyond the Cleavage.

Justin: [giggles]

Sydnee: That she loved them. So, Frownies. You can buy them today. I’m not saying you should, I’m just saying that they’re out there and they were all inspired by poor Alice’s frown lines. [laughs]

Justin: Aw, poor thing.

Sydnee: Yeah. So, in the 1950s, we started to kinda try to use science to look for what might actually help to increase— we didn’t always know, we didn’t quite know collagen yet, but we had some idea that there were substances in the skin that we were losing and we started using things like protein-based creams, like albumin-based— which is like a protein. This one I think they got from—

Justin: Is it in eggs?

Sydnee: It is in eggs. This one wasn’t from eggs. This one was from the blood of... cows? Or some animal. I don’t remember which one in particular. But they had a specific place they harvested it from, and they made different wrinkle-smoothers became pretty popular in the 1950s. In 1995, a big breakthrough was Retin-A, which you may have also have heard of as used for acne.

Justin: Yeah, it sounds familiar.

Sydnee: It’s a tretinoin, which is a metabolite of Vitamin A. Which is retinol.

Justin: What’s a metabolite?

Sydnee: It’s just a breakdown product, of Vitamin A.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And it can smooth wrinkles, it can treat acne, but it can also cause your face to be really inflamed and, like, peel.

Justin: Not great.

Sydnee: So, it's a rough, it was a rough treatment, but they did see some improvement with it. In the 90s, you also see laser resurfacing introduced, where—

Justin: Like they use for tattoo removal?

Sydnee: Sort of. They're, I mean, they're removing some of the dead skin cells, so same idea, kinda removing skin cells. Hopefully stimulating growth of new cells and collagen at the same time, was the idea with the laser resurfacing. Which just sounds like a thing you shouldn't do to your skin. Like, laser resurfacing sounds like something you do to, like, your deck.

Justin: Yeah, but so does a chemical peel. So does a lot of this stuff. Electrolysis?

Sydnee: That's true.

Justin: Like, it's savage out there.

Sydnee: That's very— that's a fair point. Fair point. One famous treatment for wrinkles that everybody has probably seen, like... I think it's mocked horribly on TV shows all the time, are collagen injections.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, those actually date back to the 1970s, and when they first came out they were considered, you know, this giant breakthrough in anti-wrinkle technology. They were initially made of cow collagen and the idea was pretty straight forward. You would inject them in a wrinkle to try to kinda fill it out.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: You know, there's a dent, let's put some stuff in there and fill in the dent, and then it will be full and smooth and the wrinkle would be gone.

Justin: If only it worked exactly like that.

Sydnee: [laughs] You had to, initially, when they introduced the product, if you wanted to try it you had to be tested to make sure you weren't allergic, because it was a foreign substance that we were injecting into your body, and so if we didn't check you to make sure you weren't allergic to it first, you could have a, as you could imagine, pretty horrible reaction.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: To this stuff we were injecting in your face. The other problem is it just didn't last very long. So, you would have this done— and you see the horrible results when things kinda drooped or fell or got really swollen.

And then you would have to do it again, eventually. The swelling was a big complication with it. In 2003, they came out with, like, a human collagen. The idea just being that you wouldn't have to worry about the allergic reaction. But same problem in that it still didn't last very long.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, that's why in this same period of time, in the 2000s, hyaluronic acid took over as a different substance that we already have naturally occurring in our skin and our joints. We do these injections in joints as well, for like, arthritis and stuff.

But that kinda took over in the 2000s because it lasted longer, you didn't have as much problem with reactions to it, and so they started doing injections of that. And then, finally, there is now some semi-synthetic fillers that they can actually inject into wrinkles. Especially for bigger wrinkles and thicker skin areas, you can use that. We don't use collagen much anymore. That's kinda fallen out of favor, just because we have better products now.

Justin: That's funny, it seems like such a... I don't know, established thing. It's surprising it's not a thing anymore.

Sydnee: Yeah, it does. It's very true, but it's just not, it's not nearly as common as it used to be.

Justin: I guess it's been supplanted by other stuff that's in vogue.

Sydnee: Mm hmm. And stuff that's probably better, I guess. Lower risk and longer lasting.

Justin: Like Botox?

Sydnee: Like Botox. So, botulism was discovered in the 1820s, initially because, you know, it could cause disease.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: [laughs] That's why we found it.

Justin: You leave... [mumbles] You leave your tomatoes open, uh oh. You got the botch.

Sydnee: [laughs] You get botulism toxin. It's a neurotoxin, it's like a bad, it's a bad thing. What followed was a lot of study and experimentation. We kind of had a few interesting— we dabbled with biological warfare using botulism toxin for a while. We moved away from that.

Justin: Good job, everybody.

Sydnee: And we figured out that there were different kinds of botulism toxins and then finally, we figured out some practical uses from all this study in the 1950s. And that's when we discovered that if we injected botulism toxin A, just one of the toxins, into a contracted muscle, it would make it relax. Now, there were actually some really important medical implications for this.

Things like torticollis, which is a condition where your neck can get stuck. Like, turned to the side in a position. That muscle gets contracted down and your neck is actually stuck. Injecting botulism toxin into that muscle could help relieve that spasm and allow you to move your neck again.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So, some really important medical uses, for facial muscle spasms, vocal cord spasms, any kind of contractures, contracted muscles, you started to kind of experiment. Could we use Botox, as it began to be known at this point in history, could we use Botox to—

Justin: Does Botox just mean botulism toxin?

Sydnee: Botulism toxin. Botox.

Justin: Okay. Huh.

Sydnee: By the 90s, though, people began realizing that in addition to all these, kind of, more medical applications, there were also some cosmetic implications from Botox. When you injected it into your face, specifically, things like frown lines seemed to disappear.

Justin: Why?

Sydnee: Because it paralyzes muscles.

Justin: Oh, okay.

Sydnee: So, they couldn't move.

Justin: Are they being supported by muscles? Like, are wrinkles being created by muscles?

Sydnee: No, but if you make everything still, then the skin isn't going to move.

Justin: Okay, alright.

Sydnee: Yeah. Everything just relaxes and holds still.

Justin: Okay. I got it.

Sydnee: So then you're not going to see them.

Justin: That makes sense.

Sydnee: Yeah. And this, when they noticed this, this created a huge demand for the product. For the product. Obviously. Because, oh my gosh, this could fix wrinkles. It was actually not approved for this use until 2002, even though it was probably being used somewhat before that.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But in 2002, and initially it was just for those— and actually, I still think to this day, it's mainly supposed to be used for the wrinkles between your eyebrows. Glabellar folds. Those wrinkles up there.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So, forehead Botox. I don't know if people are doing it for things like frown lines, but you're really not supposed to. It's really mainly for the forehead. But it is now the number one non-surgical cosmetic treatment in the country.

Justin: Congratulations, Botox! You did it.

Sydnee: As a result of that. [laughs] And you can tell, cause if somebody's had it done, you can see, like, the skin— like, it doesn't move much. Like, the forehead looks very smooth and still and—

Justin: And that wears off too, right?

Sydnee: Yeah. It does wear off over time, so you need repeated treatments. There are all kinds of new things since then. There are new creams that include, again, eggs are popular. Eggshell membranes. Retinol, that I mentioned, or Vitamin A, or Vitamin A derivatives are still very popular.

Justin: It's back? Okay.

Sydnee: Hmm?

Justin: It's back? Or it's still around?

Sydnee: No, just still around. In different forms. Placenta is a pretty popular treatment for lots of things, including wrinkles. Sheep placenta is in some creams that are supposed to help with wrinkles. I guess your own placenta could be used as well.

Justin: Listen, it's just gonna go to waste otherwise.

Sydnee: [laughs] So, placenta is in a lot of creams. I think, like, J-Lo was a big fan of placenta facials or something.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: There are some who advocate for what they call a vampire facial.

Justin: Okay?

Sydnee: Which is when you get some of your blood, however you choose to do that I guess is up to you, and you just kinda dab it all over your face.

Justin: Sure. That makes perfect sense to me.

Sydnee: Let it dry there, I guess, and then wash it off.

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: Kim Kardashian actually posted a picture of herself getting a vampire facial I found pretty upsetting. A picture of her with just blood all over her face.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I stumbled across it in my research and it was... it was very unsettling.

Justin: Yeah, I don't need that in my life.

Sydnee: No, no.

Justin: Thank you for not sharing that visual with me.

Sydnee: Others believe in leeching your face for a youthful appearance.

Justin: Doesn't really track.

Sydnee: Yeah. I think Demi Moore was a proponent of that.

Justin: This is your episode to put celebs on blast, huh Syd?

Sydnee: Well, I'm just saying... again, like I said, a lot of this stuff becomes popular because somebody who's considered beautiful, whether they be royalty or famous or whatever, starts doing it. And so, then everybody goes, "Well, I wanna look like they look, cause they look amazing, so whatever they do, I'll do too."

Justin: All we're saying is if you're gonna put your stamp of approval on something and you're a celebrity, you'd better make sure it actually works or you're gon' get wrecked. The Sydster's gonna come and wreck you.

Sydnee: Or you could just make an entire career out of it and name yourself Gwyneth Paltrow.

Justin: Boom.

Sydnee: Or, this is one of my favorites, foreskin cream.

Justin: It's actually unfair to Gwyneth. Her entire career is acting and she is extremely gifted.

Sydnee: Yeah, that's fine. There's also the whole Goop thing.

Justin: Yeah, there is that.

Sydnee: So, or foreskin cream. Oprah actually has endorsed foreskin cream in the past. There are many makers of foreskin— of something that, uh, that contains foreskin cream now that insist, "we do not put foreskin in it".

Justin: [laughs] It's a fun name?

Sydnee: "It's based on a cell line from an original foreskin from a long time ago that we continue to grow and put in our creams."

Justin: This is like, the ancestor...

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: The great, great, grand descendants of that foreskin. Oh my gosh.

Sydnee: "But we are not continuing to do this." I do not advocate this. I do not think this is a good idea. I don't think you need to remove the foreskin at all, so certainly don't turn it into a cream and put it on your face. And then there's also a variety of creams available now that we try to fix what actually is going on. Stimulate collagen, repair the cells that are damaged.

There are all kinds of, like, new things. Fruit acid peels, dermabrasion, micro abrasion, and of course there are surgeries for this now. But again, it's genetic, it's variable. I don't know. Personally, I'm fine with it.

Justin: It doesn't bother me that much, but I'm in my mid-30s, who knows, maybe I'll get more perturbed by it as I get older.

Sydnee: That's fair. That's fair. It might bother me more later.

Justin: I don't know. But that's, man that's a lot of just bad stuff, huh? We just really took a run at it. I guess since it's exterior, we'll just kind of try anything.

Sydnee: Well, I think that's really it. And a lot of these things are just creams and they might have, like, moisturizers and things in them that do make your skin feel nice, or look, you know, firmer, like it's glowing after you put it on. And so, it's really easy to sell a product that you'll look in the mirror after you use it and go, "Oh, I do look a little better."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And it doesn't actually do the long-term things that it's saying that it does.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So...

Justin: There's a lot to be gained by something feeling like it's working.

Sydnee: Yes. And it's not hard to do that when you're applying it to your whole face.

Justin: Folks, that's gonna do it for us this week. I wanna mention, cause we don't enough, we have an email address. People ask us all the time. I forget to mention it. Sawbones@MaximumFun.org. If you wanna suggest a topic that we haven't done before, then go for it. Do it right there.

Now I hear you wondering, what's MaximumFun.org you ask? Well, that's the home of Maximum Fun, our podcast network, full of a ton of great shows that you can go enjoy right now. I mean, literally hundreds of thousands of hours of high-quality content are waiting there for you at the click of a mouse or the push of a button. All for free. And you can go check it out right now, MaximumFun.org.

I wanna thank The Taxpayers, a band, for the use of their song— they should change their name to that. Taxpayers: A Band.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] For the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program. And thank you to you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, it would be great if you would tweet about the show or talk about it to somebody and iTunes reviews, subscriptions, all that stuff is really helpful and we really appreciate everybody helping to spread the word.

We got some great tweets this week from Melissa and Fox and Shaun and Joan and Sarah and Catherine and so many others tweeting about the show.

Sydnee: We also have a live show next week.

Justin: That's true. You can still come see us, I think there's a few tickets left. Bit.ly/sawbonesphilly is the address for you to go and purchase tickets. It's going to be Sunday, July 16th, doors at 1:30pm, show at 2pm. All ages at the Trocadero Theatre. Tickets are like 22 to 25 bucks.

Sydnee: And come check it out because it's part of the Philadelphia Podcast Festival, so you can come see our show and check out a lot of other wonderful podcasts as well.

Justin: Yeah. Our buddies The Flophouse are gonna be there and several others. So, come see us and come say hi. It's a good time for a show. It's like, right in the middle of the afternoon, Sunday. Come kick it. Have fun.

Sydnee: Yeah, have some brunch, come to our show.

Justin: And that's gonna do it for us, folks. Until next week, 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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