

## Sawbones 199: Tickling

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**Clint:** Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

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

**Sydnee:** And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:** Sydnee, I don't know why we've been wasting our time... with medicine.

**Sydnee:** Well, uh... okay. I went to medical school for four years and I've done a three-year residency in order to tell you *about* med— I mean, I don't know if I could do it in a podcast—

**Justin:** You're right, I didn't speak accurately.

**Sydnee:** Wait, should I start right— um, okay. Let's start with the anatomy.

**Justin:** No, let me try again. I don't know why *you've* been wasting your time with medicine, because I was reading a poster that had a cat on it. and it said laughter—

**Sydnee:** Those are the best sources of information.

**Justin:** It said laughter is the best medicine. So, I don't know why—

**Sydnee:** What was the cat doing?

**Justin:** Laughing. Just laugh—

**Sydnee:** The cat was laughing?

**Justin:** Laughing. There was another cat doing something silly and that first cat was like—

**Sydnee:** And the first cat was laughing.

**Justin:** Was laughing. And the cat was tickled. So I'm saying why didn't you learn just how to tickle great. Is that the first class?

**Sydnee:** In med school?

**Justin:** Mm hmm.

**Sydnee:** No.

**Justin:** But it's the best medicine.

**Sydnee:** No. We're not directly discouraged from tickling our patients, like there's not a— I mean, that's not part of the Hippocratic Oath.

**Justin:** I assume it would be frowned on? Right?

**Sydnee:** [laughs] But generally speaking, it's assumed you won't tickle your patients.

**Justin:** Please don't tickle your patients.

**Sydnee:** Please don't tickle your patients.

**Justin:** But, okay, so tickling...

**Sydnee:** Not a medical treatment.

**Justin:** Not a medical treatment. Laughter, not the best medicine. You just kinda debunked that pretty quick.

**Sydnee:** Well no, I'm not saying— okay. I would not say that laughter is the best medicine. We've talked about laughter before on this show.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** I'm not saying laughter is bad for you. In fact, it's probably good for you. But, I mean, in some cases, like let's say you got syphilis, penicillin is better than laughter.

**Justin:** Yeah. That's accurate.

**Sydnee:** So.

**Justin:** That's accurate.

**Sydnee:** Now, tickling, I don't think that it could be used as medicine necessarily, but I do think it's interesting to talk about. It's a medical-adjacent phenomenon, right? It's a weird thing the human body does, and that falls within our jurisdiction.

**Justin:** Let's do it. Let's talk about tickling.

**Sydnee:** So, Justin, what— do you know what tickling is? [laughs]

**Justin:** Yeah, it's when you squinch... squinch on somebody's tum-tum or somebody's...

**Sydnee:** You squinch on them?

**Justin:** You squinch on them on the tum-tum, or—

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** You do the cow bite thing on their leg, where you measure how big their hand is and then you tickle them that far from the kneecap and you squeeze and they're like, "Don't squeeze me there."

**Sydnee:** Right. Okay.

**Justin:** Which, yeah. If they don't laugh, tickling is basically, like, assault. [laughs] So you have to be very careful.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. Actually, it— well, we'll get into that. It can be.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So, tickling in general is some sensation of something either moving lightly across your skin, that's actually one kind of tickling. Like, you know that, like, you feel something like a hair, a stray hair, brushes across your skin, or...

**Justin:** Like, on the roof of your mouth? That one always gets me. You scrape something across the roof of your mouth.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. And then there's also, obviously, intentional tickling, which can be a little... um, I don't wanna say rougher. [laughs]

**Justin:** It's like squinches.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. But like, it is a more pressure applied maneuver. And then the associated response. Laughing, smiling, withdrawing from it. That's part of tickling. You know, if that's not happening, you're not tickling.

**Justin:** If that's not happening, if you're not laughing, you ain't being tickled.

**Sydnee:** You're not doing it right. We all tend to be ticklish in fairly similar areas. And, I mean, it varies from person to person, the degree and which spot is the most ticklish, but generally speaking, underarms, sides of the torso, the neck, the knee, the midriff, the perineum is very ticklish.

**Justin:** Ah, yes. The... taint. [snorts]

**Sydnee:** Thank you, honey. Thank you very much. Also, your belly button.

**Justin:** [laughs] We're not allowed to curse on this show, so taint is as good as it gets here.

**Sydnee:** I'm glad. Just really indulge in that.

**Justin:** *I'm* tickled now.

**Sydnee:** Just really enjoy yourself.

**Justin:** I'm tickled, just from saying it.

**Sydnee:** And your ribs, classically.

**Justin:** Classically.

**Sydnee:** The ribs, yeah. Aristotle talked about tickling. We've talked about tickling as long as we've talked, because it's interesting and it—Aristotle thought that it was the privilege of humans.

He thought that humans had— that all of our senses were heightened above all of other animals, and so tickling, being a form of our sense of touch, you know, our sensation, feeling, would also be more heightened and so that only humans would be able to tickle, be tickled. It was just a privilege of humanity.

**Justin:** So, are you saying that no animals other than humans can be tickled?

**Sydnee:** No. Aristotle was wrong.

**Justin:** Oh.

**Sydnee:** You can tickle a rat.

**Justin:** No, I can't, actually, thank you!

**Sydnee:** A lot of people do. We'll talk about the studies. A lot of people like to tickle rats. But no, all primates can be tickled, and actually there's something called trout tickling. I thought that was interesting. It's like, Aristotle thinks only humans can be tickled, but so can trouts.

**Justin:** Trouts?

**Sydnee:** Okay, so trout tickling, as far as I can tell, it's not like tickling as we think of it. I had to read about this, because I thought this can't, surely, I'm misinterpreting this. If you, like, gently stroke the underbelly of a trout, it will go into a trance.

**Justin:** [snorts]

**Sydnee:** And then you can just, you know, grab it.

**Justin:** It's a way easier way to catch them, huh?

**Sydnee:** Yeah, it's an easier way of catching trout. But they call it trout tickling. There are, like, other names for it, but trout tickling is one of them.

**Justin:** Okay, fine. That's weird.

**Sydnee:** Shakespeare wrote about it, like, tickling trouts, in Twelfth Night or something. Anyway.

**Justin:** Not euphemistically. He wrote about it literally.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So, Plato also pondered why do we, why do we tickle. Why do we tickle and be tickled?

**Justin:** Why do we tickle, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:** Why do we tickle? And he focused a lot on the angle of humans enjoy pleasure that's mixed with pain.

**Justin:** Ah yes. Salt and pepper.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. So, tickling falls into that kind of realm.

**Justin:** Sugar and spice.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] And this is why, there was actually, through the centuries there were in some royal courts, court ticklers.

**Justin:** [snorts] Good gig. Good gig if you can get it.

**Sydnee:** This is real. And usually, anybody could be tickled, but for instance, a lot of the time this was done for, like, the Tsarinas. So this were female royalty being ticked. So, if you're gonna have female royalty being tickled, the only proper thing is to either have female ticklers or eunuchs, actually, would be—

**Justin:** Eunuchs. I was about to guess eunuch ticklers.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** And what a noble reason to become a eunuch, so you can tickle people.

**Sydnee:** So you can tickle the Tsarina's feet.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And that was basically what they would do. They would be positioned down at their feet. They would have their feet propped up,

probably on something very fancy-looking and ornate. I bet they have, like, tickling stools. I didn't find those, but you know there was some sort of tickling footrest.

**Justin:** Had to be, had to be. Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And they would prop their feet up and then the court ticklers would stand at their feet and tickle them with feathers or their fingers or whatever. And this was, like, Catherine the Great and Elizabeth, and they had their feet tickled. And the idea—and while they did this, they would also have to, like, tell them kinda raunchy stories or...

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** Sing songs that were...

**Justin:** Make a whole afternoon of it.

**Sydnee:** Yeah! They were kinda inappropriate. The whole idea was that this was trying to get, like, help these women get aroused.

**Justin:** Oh...

**Sydnee:** Yes. That was the whole purpose.

**Justin:** Oh.

**Sydnee:** It was very intentional. This was like foreplay, this was something to get you in the mood so that later on, for their lovers, they would...

**Justin:** Be...

**Sydnee:** Be...

**Justin:** Pre-tickled.

**Sydnee:** There you go.

**Justin:** Alright.

**Sydnee:** Gotta get your ladies pre-tickled.

**Justin:** [snorts]

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Anyway, so there are different—

**Justin:** “Uh, Valerie, are you being tickled in there?”

“Uh, yes dear.”

“Valerie, I have to go into the office tonight...”

“I know.”

Ugh, like, no. That— okay.

**Sydnee:** I’m assuming— we are— you’re assuming the women don’t want to be tickled.

**Justin:** No, I’m not.

**Sydnee:** There Tsarinas may have very much enjoyed the tickling.

**Justin:** I’m just saying—

**Sydnee:** In fact, I have no reason to believe they didn’t enjoy the tickling.

**Justin:** I’m saying tickling is a wild precursor, but again, not gonna yuck any yums. Whatever fruits your loops. If you... if that’s your bag...

**Sydnee:** There are a lot of people very into tickling.

**Justin:** Cool. That’s cool. That’s—

**Sydnee:** Not you. You’re very ticklish. Not you.

**Justin:** It’s not the— it’s not— okay. No. I don’t want to get it twisted. This is not about... it’s like... it’s not your lover doing the tickling. Someone else is getting, like, went out into the cold and put the key in the ignition and turned the car on and let it heat up, and then you’re—

**Sydnee:** Like a fluffer.

**Justin:** Okay, stop it. Move on! [laughs]

**Sydnee:** There are different types of tickling.



**Justin:** Mm hmm. Clearly. I mean, clearly!

**Sydnee:** There are two large categories of tickling. A lot of what we've been talking about is gargalesis. That's when you tickle someone. When you, like, intentionally go over and, you know, you're having a tickle fight or when I'm— Justin hates being tickled.

**Justin:** I don't, it— now, do you—

**Sydnee:** You do, you hate, you react very violently, you're very ticklish, you hate it.

**Justin:** It's not that I hate being tickled. I hate when people I love tickle me because I'm always afraid I'm going to lash out, out of my own control.

**Sydnee:** Sure.

**Justin:** And I don't wanna hurt anybody.

**Sydnee:** You're just so strong and powerful.

**Justin:** I'm very strong and very powerful and I don't wanna hurt anyone with my flailing.

**Sydnee:** This is different than knismesis, which is a different kind of tickling. We won't spend as much time on it, but it's that sensation, that kind of light, itchy sensation when, you know, like I said, when a strand of hair kinda brushes across your neck in the wrong way. You know what I mean?

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** That feeling. It is a kind of tickling. It's the same sort of feeling you'd get, like, if a bug, like a small spider or something, landed on you.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Which is probably the purpose of it. Why do you get that sensation, ah, is there an attacker? [laughs]

**Justin:** Oh, okay, yeah.

**Sydnee:** Is there an insect on me? Is something about to crawl on me that could bite me or sting me or kill me or whatever. And so, that sensation makes you immediately grab at it, scratch at it, brush it off. That kinda thing.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** It's also helpful for grooming. This is probably also, like, a vestigial grooming, prior to mirrors, kind of thing.

**Justin:** To know where the hairs and stuff are at.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. Cause you have that sensation, or like, if you've got a big clod of dirt or something, I don't know, on your face you feel it and go, "Huh, I think there's something on my face."

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** So, that's one kind of tickling. Gargalesis, like I said, is that deeper, rougher touch that makes people laugh. And this is humans and all primates and rats can be tickled. There are lots of studies on tickling rats.

**Justin:** Ugh.

**Sydnee:** Because they can be and we're interested. And it's kinda cool, I actually read one researcher was saying, you know, we spend so much time researching the more negative sides of human emotions, you know, the more negative extremes so that we can understand better conditions like depression and anxiety and that kinda thing, but we don't spend a lot of time researching things that make us happy, like tickling, and so that's why he likes he go into it. He likes to study tickling because it's a happy thing. It makes him happy.

**Justin:** I think that that's— but I think that that's human. I think that the things that make us happy we attribute a kinda magic to and we don't necessarily wanna delve deeper into the scientific explanations of it because it's like trying to explain a joke, where you lose the magic thing in the trying to understand it better. And I think when we're talking about sad things or anger or whatever, trying to understand them clinically is a way for us to process them and make them seem conquerable, make them seem like something we can handle. So it makes sense to me.

**Sydnee:** Well, I can see that, but you're not a scientist. [laughs]

**Justin:** Says you.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Scientists like to study everything.

**Justin:** Tell that to the celery I dyed blue in fourth grade.

**Sydnee:** Our job is to tell you that— you know what, magic may be real, it may not, but this is science. So, we'll talk to you about it. This is not magic.

**Justin:** That's fine, I'm good over here. Go ahead, though.

**Sydnee:** So, like I said, a lot of people like to tickle rats. They have very similar reactions to humans, although it's more like a squeaking. It's not like laughing. But they admit a high-pitched squeal when you tickle them.

**Justin:** Like, as if rats could not be worse. Let's tickle them.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] They enjoy it. If you tickle a rat, it will kind of scurry away and then come back for more tickling. It's like fun, like there's this big hand tickling me.

**Justin:** Can we speed this section up, please? This is miserable for me. I'm imaging someone like, [dull voice] "Ooh, tickling a rat. They love this. They love this."

**Sydnee:** There's a reaction— [laughs]

**Justin:** "What an excellent way to spend my career, tickling rats." Stop. Move on. Please. Anything else.

**Sydnee:** There's a reaction, I thought this was interesting. How do they know that rats enjoy it? There's something I found that scientists like to call joy jumps.

**Justin:** Ugh!

**Sydnee:** Which are not just in rats. They see it in lots of different animals, including humans. They also see it in guinea pigs and dogs and foxes and lambs, and basically they described it as jumping with both your legs together.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** They said little kids will do this a lot when they're excited. When they're happy and full of joy. So it's a way of knowing, like, "Oh, they're liking this. They did a joy jump."

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** I don't do that much, I don't think.

**Justin:** No. No, we're in our 30s. [laughs]

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** All our joy jumps are in the rear-view mirror.

**Sydnee:** The purpose of these studies is that they've located a tickle center in the brain. So they can stimulate your tickle center and make you feel tickled, even if you're not being tickled.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** There you go. Why do we tickle?

**Justin:** Because we nasty.

**Sydnee:** Why in the world would this be something the human body does?

**Justin:** I have no idea.

**Sydnee:** I mean, because most things that we still have, like, there was some sort of evolutionary advantage, there's a reason.

**Justin:** It seems like, if I had to take a wild shot in the dark, and I have not looked at your notes so please do not accuse me of it if I'm right, on the off-chance that I am right. But it seems like something that would be a defense mechanism. Like, hey, you shouldn't be repeatedly causing trauma there.

**Sydnee:** That is actually one theory. And I'm gonna tell you, there are several different theories on this and it has not been concretely answered.

**Justin:** But the smartest people are on my side.

**Sydnee:** There are people who believe that has to do with, like, the development of combat moves.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** So, if you— [laughs]

**Justin:** Like my taekwondo class?

**Sydnee:** Yeah. If you look at the areas of the human body that are ticklish, they're also fairly vulnerable areas for attack. And the idea is that, so we're tickled a lot as kids by, like, our parents, and so we learn how to reflexively protect those areas.

**Justin:** This is what— so it's, this is what I'm saying!

**Sydnee:** From tickling.

**Justin:** This is what I'm saying. I'm a green belt. My body's a weapon. If you tickle me, I cannot be held responsible for what happens.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] But the thing is, what's really interesting is then, so, you tickle a kid, they reflexively learn how to protect those areas so you can't tickle them, but what also happens is they laugh and smile, which is a social signal to us as the parents to continue to tickle the child. So, it's a feedback loop. It makes us keep tickling them and makes them learn how to protect themselves through this positive social interaction.

**Justin:** So it's like, "I want you to stop, but my body is making it seem like I want you to do more. So, I have to learn how to fight my dad!"

**Sydnee:** "So I'll learn how to defend myself."

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** In a safe way. So, evolutionary advantage is another theory. And this is similar to the combat moves, but the other thing is just like that social interaction. We learn how to, like, safely play, physically interact with— again, a lot of these theories are based on the idea that siblings and parents are usually the first ones to tickle a child. And so, they learn, like, this is safe interaction.

And then it also, it also teaches us things like, you know, sometimes your parents are gonna have to, like, let's say that you got a splinter, or you scraped your knee and it's really dirty and they're gonna have to wash it off. They're gonna do something to you that doesn't feel good, you know, when they pull that splinter out it doesn't feel good, but it's for your own good. Like, it's a safe thing. And because they're your parents, you can trust them to do that. And so, sometimes your parents do things that don't seem like they would be a good idea, but they really are.

Do you know that baby chimpanzees and baby humans both react to the, like, "I'm gonna get you," like, you hold your hands up with the tickling motion, and they both laugh and giggle when you do that. They both get all excited.

**Justin:** When I do it, or when other monkeys do it?

**Sydnee:** Well, I mean, I think for— actually, for chimpanzees, I mean, I think they've practiced this in the lab.

**Justin:** Oh, cool.

**Sydnee:** So, you can practice the same thing.

**Justin:** Can you answer a question for me?

**Sydnee:** Sure.

**Justin:** Because its one that I've wanted to know for so long. Why can't I tickle myself?

**Sydnee:** Oh, I have a whole section on that. I'm gonna get there. But first, we're gonna go to the billing department.

**Justin:** Let's go!

[ad break]

**Justin:** Sydnee, I have to know: why can't I tickle myself?

**Sydnee:** So, Justin, a lot of people have tried to figure out why we can't, why is that impossible. And a lot of it has to do with the unpredictability that's involved with tickling. When someone comes at you to tickle you,

you don't know exactly where and when and how and what depth of pressure, and all that kinda stuff, that sensation is going to occur.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** And that seems to be, that aspect has to be present for the tickling to occur. You have to not be able to predict. Now, when you tickle yourself, you know exactly where and when and how deep and all that kinda stuff you're going to be tickling.

**Justin:** You can sit on your hand until it falls asleep and then try it. I don't know if that would work.

**Sydnee:** Probably not.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** I don't think so. But if you can predict it, then you can't. They practiced this, actually, with, like, people who could control a tickling machine to tickle them. So, they like, they moved the lever and had the little tickler come and tickle them in different places and they couldn't be tickled, because they were in charge.

**Justin:** It's inherently social. It is an inherently social behavior.

**Sydnee:** [sighs] Maybe. This is still debatable.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Because the other part of this is that we have observed that in some people who have schizophrenia they *can* tickle themselves.

**Justin:** Wow, really?

**Sydnee:** And it has to do with that, and we talked about this, I think, before, we've mentioned this, that it has to do with auditory hallucinations. That your brain's inability to completely distinguish between external and internal stimuli, that when you can't, you can't tell where the stimulus is coming from, that you may be able to tickle yourself.

So, you can't tell if that is someone else's hand or your own, and since those signals are not firing exactly the same, then you might be able to tickle yourself.

**Justin:** Wow.

**Sydnee:** So, that's not across the board, but there are people who have schizophrenia who are able to tickle themselves.

**Justin:** That's fascinating.

**Sydnee:** So, and what's also interesting is that tickling response is mood-dependent. And they have observed this when they have seen the difference between, like, in experiments, a parent tickling a child and a stranger tickling a child. When a parent tickles a child, you get more of the laughing and smiling and, I mean, they might wriggle away, but it looks enjoyable, whereas when someone they don't know tickles the child, the child is more likely to yell or withdraw. They're still being tickled, but it's a completely different response.

So, the way that you respond to tickling or how ticklish you are, what you do, it really depends on the situation. The more apprehension you have for it, which usually has to do with the more embarrassed you are by it, or maybe the more ticklish you are, the different your response will be, too.

**Justin:** Is there any gender difference? Like, is there men, women, either of them more or less ticklish?

**Sydnee:** No, we've never been able to tell any difference. It seems to be pretty equally distributed. Obviously, some people are more ticklish than others, but gender doesn't play a role. And it is interesting, people who tend to be more embarrassed by tickling tend to be more ticklish.

**Justin:** That makes sense.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, which kinda makes sense. And they have more anticipation and nervousness, so like, even before you tickle them they start laughing. And I've seen that with you.

**Justin:** What?

**Sydnee:** If you think I'm about to tickle you, you start laughing.



**Justin:** That is true.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. In order to try to figure out exactly what you asked me, is this just a social thing— that’s what a lot of people have theorized, it’s just a social interaction thing then. Like, in adolescence, the theory is that when you see, like, teenagers tickling each other it’s because they have a lot of sexual energy and they don’t quite know what to do with it yet.

**Justin:** Yeah. “I’ll try this, I don’t know.”

**Sydnee:** “This seems like an outlet that nobody will yell at me for.”  
[laughs]

**Justin:** “I have no idea what I’m doing.”

**Sydnee:** “I don’t know what I’m doing, maybe we tickle each other now?” So, they thought maybe it’s just social. So, in order to try to help answer that question, there were some researchers in California, this was in the 90s, who decided to do it with a tickle machine.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** So, they’re idea was “We’ll make a tickle machine—”

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** [laughs] “And then, we’ll tickle subjects with both the tickle machine and with human hands and we’ll see what their response is, and does it have to be a human.” Because if tickling is a social thing, then a tickle machine shouldn’t be able to replicate it, but if it is a, just a reflex, then it wouldn’t matter. But the problem is after they started working on this, they realized, well, how can you ever ensure that a tickle machine could either do as well as a human or, on the flipside, what if a tickle machine is the ideal tickler and is just so good at tickling...

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** So, there was no way to control for how—

**Justin:** Then we get outpaced, The Singularity is here.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] There was no way to control for how good at tickling the machine might be.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** So, instead of actually tickling people with a machine, and I love the idea of this, I kept trying to find a picture of this machine they built, they built this machine that was sort of like a box that was about a computer-sized box and it had, like, this hose attached to it with a fake hand on it. And they led subjects into the room, sitting in a chair, across from the tickle machine.

**Justin:** [snorts] If you're in this scenario and you do not stand up and walk out, all of your biological instincts have been dulled by modern society.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** You are left, you are a babe in the woods.

**Sydnee:** I have to imagine that for most of these experiments they're like, they're researchers at a college somewhere doing it, and so they're just like, paying poor college students, like, "You'll do anything for 20 bucks, right?"

**Justin:** Literally even the most upsetting Twilight Zone, Jigsaw nonsense.

**Sydnee:** Just to keep you in Natty Light for another weekend.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] You'll come in and let us tickle you with a machine. Anyway, they blindfolded them and what they would say is, "We'll tell you when you're being tickled by a human and we'll tell you when you're being tickled by a machine, and you just react." And they lied. Hiding underneath the tickle machine, they had like, a table with a tablecloth on it, hiding underneath the tickle machine was a person.

**Justin:** A pervert? Is that what you were gonna to say?

**Sydnee:** No, no.

**Justin:** A person? Okay, person.

**Sydnee:** A person. And in reality, they tickled the subject every time. So, they were never being tickled by a machine. But they told them at times that they were being tickled by a machine. And so, if it was a social interaction, if they thought it was just a machine, whether it tickled or not they wouldn't react.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** Does that make sense?

**Justin:** Yes, it does.

**Sydnee:** Well, they laughed the same every time.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** There was absolutely no difference. And so, these researchers argued this is not a social interaction, it's just a reflex. You're just ticklish. When you touch these areas, it feels a certain way and you react this way and that's it. And I'm not saying that's the definitive answer, but there are still two schools of thought. Is this some sort of social thing, is this just a reflex, is it evolution, what is it?

**Justin:** But unless someone has made a machine that could tickle well...

**Sydnee:** It's still hard to say.

**Justin:** Then we don't have an answer.

**Sydnee:** No.

**Justin:** Like, cause it could just be something that we know instinctively. Like, the social exchange doesn't have to be— maybe it's not the tickled, but rather the tickler. You know?

**Sydnee:** Sure.

**Justin:** That is making the connection, like, they know how to do it. I just, I can't imagine a machine tickling me like a person could.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** Sorry. Maybe I'm a luddite.

**Sydnee:** I tried to find tickle machines and it's a—

**Justin:** On eBay?

**Sydnee:** It's a sketchy thing to start Googling.

**Justin:** [cringes]

**Sydnee:** I abandoned that search pretty quickly. So, as you mentioned, like we've talked about, not everybody enjoys being tickled, and tickling has been used as torture at times. Because it's actually similar to pain responses.

They've tried to figure out exactly which nerves cause you to be tickled and they're similar to some pain responses and they can result in embarrassment, so you have cases of, like, the Nazis using tickling.

There's a punishment mentioned in ancient Japanese texts for some crimes that fell outside of the criminal code, and the punishment is what translates to "merciless tickling".

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** The Romans would actually torture people by applying saltwater to the bottom of their feet. They would strap them to a table, put saltwater on the bottom of their feet and let a goat lick it off.

**Justin:** Ugh.

**Sydnee:** And just do that over and over and over again.

**Justin:** Oh, that does sound pretty rough, actually.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, which goes beyond tickling because eventually that's gonna remove the skin from your feet. So, initially it's a tickling torture, but then it's something much worse.

And then, as I mentioned, it's also been used on the flipside as pleasure. In addition to the court ticklers and teen ticklers that we talked about, there are tickling spas where you can go get tickle treatments.

**Justin:** There's tickling leagues. You get— check out the documentary Tickled.

**Sydnee:** I was hoping you'd mention that.

**Justin:** Go on a journey with me and go watch that film. Don't listen to anything else. Don't research it.

**Sydnee:** No, don't google it, don't read about it.

**Justin:** Just go watch Tickled.

**Sydnee:** Go watch the film Tickled.

**Justin:** That's a journey.

**Sydnee:** Tickling, they claim at these tickling spas that it will relax you. Basically like a regular massage. And it's like, 60 bucks an hour and you get a tickle treatment.

**Justin:** Sure.

**Sydnee:** As far as any kind of medical application for tickling... I couldn't really find one that was well-documented or researched. I mean, we've talked about laughing being beneficial, but that doesn't necessarily translate to tickling.

I've seen, like, I've found a couple places where there were privately-advertised therapists who use tickling as part of their personal treatment. I don't know that that's recognized by any, like, society.

I mean, I'm not saying it's condemned, I'm just saying I don't think that's, like, an evidence-based thing. I think that's part of their personal treatment program. And they use it for things like depression and PTSD. But I found, while I found it advertised, I found other people highly criticizing it, so I don't know. But it's not evidence-based, but I've seen that there are therapists who may apply this in certain cases. I think that's probably pretty rarely done. And is there a cure for tickling?

**Justin:** Just stop.

**Sydnee:** Well, I mean if you're very ticklish, is there a way to not be ticklish?

**Justin:** No.

**Sydnee:** No, there's not. That's true. You can, and I read this mainly when I was looking— I was looking for a cure for tickling and this is a lot in, like, sex problems, like people looking for sex advice.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** And like, "My partner's really ticklish and I don't mean to tickle them, but we keep trying to become intimate and then it gets disturbed by this tickling and what should I do?" And in addition to lots of advice about making sure that your partner cares about this stuff and wants to be less ticklish and all that kinda stuff, obviously this is with consent, but you can actually let the person guide you as you tickle them, and if they have control of your hand, they won't be tickled.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Because, we talked about it, it'd be sort of like tickling yourself. You're just involving another person's hand in the process.

**Justin:** Huh.

**Sydnee:** And that can actually kinda help ease you into whatever activity you're about to engage in. It doesn't cure the tickling, but it can alleviate the tickle response in those situations. But otherwise you just gotta say "don't tickle me."

**Justin:** Just say "don't tickle me."

**Sydnee:** And as a rule of thumb, if somebody says "don't tickle me..."

**Justin:** Don't.

**Sydnee:** Don't.

**Justin:** Unless it's your child and you're training them for combat, apparently.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** In which case you should just go buck wild.

**Sydnee:** No. I always stop. When Charlie tells me to stop tickling her, I always stop. It's just the thing is, then she says, "Okay, tickle me more."

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Cause kids like being tickled!

**Justin:** They like being tickled.

**Sydnee:** Generally. Not all.

**Justin:** Generally, not all.

**Sydnee:** But generally, generally.

**Justin:** Folks, that's gonna do it for us. Thank you so much for tuning in this week. We hope you have fun and enjoyed yourself. Um... thanks to the MaximumFun.org network for letting us be a part of their podcasting family. Thank you to The Taxpayers for letting us use their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program.

And I actually wanna say a quick thank you. We have a post office box. Thanks, uh, someone sent us the Life & Death game, not sure, from TC. "Does This Look Infected" podcast sent Nekos. Thanks, Matt, for the cards. Bonnie of Buddy Bean Boutique for the beautiful dress. Nina sent a lovely Sawbones tumbler we've used a ton. Sandra sent a John Hunter book. Adam for a cool mouse ear. Sarah sent comics, Angelique sent her Aunt Cheryl's book, Nick and Tiffany sent a gummy science kit that we had a lot of fun with with the Chuckster. And Jess made beautiful troll stickers for Charlie's birthday that she made herself and they are lovely. So, thank you to all of you fine folks.

You can find other shows that our family makes at McElroyShows.com along with the PO box addresses, if you need those. And that is gonna do it for us for this week. So, 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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