

Sawbones 364: Vaccine Verification

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[theme music plays]

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

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy. You sounded surprised there, that you're Justin McElroy.

Justin: Honestly, you've been— uh, I'm just excited. You've been on hospital service this week, and I feel like we haven't had much time to talk, and if it takes putting microphones in front of us to get that done, then... alright. I'll take it.

Sydnee: It's been a busy week.

Justin: It has been a busy week.

Sydnee: This is very true.

Justin: It has been a busy week.

Sydnee: I'm looking forward to sleeping again soon.

Justin: Yes, someday.

Sydnee: [simultaneously] Someday.

Justin: Some sweet day.

Sydnee: We said it at the same time. I don't know if you heard me.

Justin: What?

Sydnee: Someday.

Justin: Someday? We both said it—

Sydnee: We said it at the exact same time, yeah.

Justin: Isolate it! [wheezes]

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: Rachel? Enhance! No. It's okay, Rachel. You don't need to enhance it.

Sydnee: Uh, so, Justin.

Justin: Sydnee.

Sydnee: I wanna talk about something this week— first of all, I want to set out the name of what I'm talking about, and continue to use this term, because it is the most accurate, truthful term that should be used.

Justin: The Mark of the Beast.

Sydnee: Oh no. [sighs] No, no, no, no, no.

Justin: [amused] No? What do you want to go with?

Sydnee: [sing-song] No, no, no, no, no. [laughs quietly]

Justin: What do you wanna go with?

Sydnee: Vaccine verifications.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: First of all, thank you, Patrick Kelly, for recommending this topic. I really appreciate it. I hadn't thought about it as a potential *Sawbones* topic. I mean, I was aware of it. But, like, the history of it and getting into it and, um,

some of the information about it and stuff, um, came from this listener, so thank you. I appreciate it.

Because it's really important right now, with all of the various COVID-19 vaccines out there, that we're talking about it a lot, and encouraging people to get vaccinated.

Justin: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: Yes. And that's the only way we get out of this mess.

Justin: Come on! West Virginia, I'm looking at you. You're slippin'!

Sydnee: Yep.

Justin: Although I bet the number of West Virginians that have not gotten their vaccine and yet listen to *Sawbones* is a pretty slim lil sliver on the Venn diagram, but...

Sydnee: They're still not listening, yes. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] Still! If you're out there...

Sydnee: Hoo. Uh, first of all, it is really important. This is not a passport. I'm gonna get into the history of this, but this is not a— that is not the accurate name for this document. So, when you talk about vaccine passports, that is not what these are. They're not.

Because, uh, the government issues a passport after they evaluate you and make decisions about you based on information that you provide them, and it's only something that the government can give you, sort of, like, grant you as a reward for... you know.

Justin: Being such a great citizen.

Sydnee: Not committing a lot of crimes or something.

Justin: Something. We don't know.

Sydnee: Whatever. Whatever the criteria is. That is not what this is, because you don't have to, like, prove you're worthy of one of these. You just get the vaccine. It's a statement of truth. It's a fact. It's a card that reflects a truth, which is, you've been vaccinated.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: That's all it is.

Justin: Yep.

Sydnee: So it's a verification.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: That's it.

Justin: Yes. Got it.

Sydnee: Uh, and why are we talking about this?

Justin: Uh, 'cause there was a global pandemic recently. It's kind of winding down, but—

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] So maybe I hadn't noticed.

Justin: [laughs quietly] Yeah, so you might've missed it, but yeah, it's a global pandemic, and then there's vaccines out there for people, so.

Sydnee: There has been a lot of debate, more specifically, about this exact topic. Is it ethical, is it just, is it in line with... American values? But maybe in other countries they are also discussing this. I'm not going to say that this is a uniquely American discussion. But is it okay to require some form of proof that you've received a vaccine to participate in various activities? Travel being the most common one that is sort of floated, right?

Justin: Yes. Inter— are you talking about interstate or international?

Sydnee: Uh, right now the only way in which people are talking about it are international.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Traveling. Um, I don't... I can't see that— well, this is an opinion. This is not a fact. It's hard for me to see that being an interstate travel thing.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Because it's really easy— we could be in a different state from where we are in our state in... minutes.

Justin: Yes. But it doesn't necessarily prohibit this from being used to exclude you from, like, things that happen in— like, to get in to, like, a baseball game for example, or something like that.

Sydnee: Well, it's tough, 'cause then you're getting into private events, so there's— and we're gonna get into all this.

Justin: Okay, alright, sorry. I don't mean to derail you.

Sydnee: There's multiple levels in which this could apply, and different politicians have already come out to very loudly express their views on this subject. Um, oftentimes I find they don't necessarily look into all of the reasons behind it; pros, cons, risks, benefits. They just sort of...

Justin: Weird!

Sydnee: ... say things about it.

Justin: [sarcastically] *Our* politicians? In America?

Sydnee: Uh-huh. Um, the Governor of Florida, the great state of Florida, Ron DeSantis, has made it clear that [emphatically] this will not happen to Floridians!

Justin: [holding back laughter] No.

Sydnee: Not on his watch.

Justin: No, no, no.

Sydnee: No, sir. Um, this is an invasion of their privacy, and he won't stand for it. Um, QAnon spokeswoman—

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: —and US Congresswoman, and friend of Matt Gaetz, Marjorie Taylor Greene... [laughs quietly]

Justin: [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: I think she likes all those titles.

Justin: Quite the resume you've crafted for her, there.

Sydnee: Yeah, when you talk about her I think she prefers that you make sure that all her bona fides be right there at the— it's important to recognize someone's accomplishments.

Uh, she called it Biden's Mark of the Beast. Um... I guess that's what you were referencing in the beginning, there.

Justin: Yeah. Kind of a fun joke.

Sydnee: And for his part, Biden just said there won't be a federally issued vaccine verification card.

Justin: Well, there.

Sydnee: So. Well, he didn't— like, a spokesperson said it for him.

Justin: Yeah. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: But—[laughs] but basically, that's... so why is everybody all upset? Is this something we could do? Is it ethical? Is there a history of this? Is it something we have done, do, already do?

Uh, and that's what I want to address. Because yes, there's precedent for this. And you're probably already sitting there thinking, "Well, I did have to get a vaccine for... " whatever you're thinking about at this moment. But, I mean, 'cause this is not a wild idea.

Justin: We do it at schools, right? I mean...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. Uh, but I think that talking specifically about the idea of some sort of card that just says, "Yes, I got a vaccine," why it is not something to be afraid of, uh, why it *is* something we should approach thoughtfully and with consideration of a lot of different factors.

Um, but at the end of the day, the majority of people in this country already support the idea.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: So I think that's important to say. You'll hear a lot of people shouting it down, but the majority of people are like, "Meh. I just really wanna go out into the world again. [laughs quietly] Whatever— whatever you need, could I please leave my home? Thank you. It's been a long year."

So, a common phrase at the turn of the 19th century was "Show a scar."

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: Do you know what that was in reference to?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: So, smallpox, which we have talked about on the show before, had long been a scourge throughout the world. We did a whole episode on it. Killing many, permanently scarring a large fraction of those who did survive it, um, with all the little pocks, sores all over your body could leave a scar, and so you could be quite scarred from smallpox afterwards. Not everyone was, but you could.

And when Jenner introduced the cowpox inoculation in 1796, which was the precursor to what would later be used to vaccinate against smallpox, which again, we've talked about. But taking—

Justin: No, that was Kris Jenner, mother of Kim Kardashian.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Creator of the smallpox... vaccine. Of course. That's the Jenner Sydnee's referring to.

Sydnee: Yes, obviously.

Justin: For historical context.

Sydnee: Uh, but when this was first introduced, this marked the beginning of the end for the pox virus known as smallpox. But, uh, how did you prove you got the vaccine?

So he introduced cowpox inoculation. This would eventually become a vaccine with a different virus, the vaccinia virus. That's where vaccine— that's what it all comes from. I know it seems, like, convenient.

Justin: Oh, yeah, yeah, we've covered this, haven't we?

Sydnee: Yes, we've covered this. Uh, well, back then you could do a few things. If you had been vaccinated against smallpox and somebody needed proof that you had, you could provide a document that said it. So, whoever gave you the vaccine could just write it down in old-timey fashion.

Justin: With a— with the little pen, dippin' it in the— the little well! The whole bit.

Sydnee: Thou has receiveth...

Justin: Get the feather. The whole bit.

Sydnee: Uh, the vaccine. And you could prove that. Or you could just roll up your sleeve and show them your scar. Because the smallpox vaccine was different from probably a lot of the vaccines you've received, although there are people who are very well listening to this podcast who did get a smallpox vaccine, and know this difference.

The original process, back in Jenner's day, involved sort of cutting your skin and, like, rubbing some pus or scabs, some residue—

Justin: Right, yes.

Sydnee: —into it.

Justin: Very grody.

Sydnee: Yes, to inoculate you, to give you the cowpox, and then you would form a scab at that site, and then when the scab healed and fell off it left a pretty distinctive-looking scar.

Uh, now obviously we didn't stick with this method. Over time, we refined the smallpox vaccine. But even the updated method still could leave a mark. Have you seen the way— because, I mean, there are people... there are a lot of people alive today who received a smallpox vaccine. We did not, because by the time we came along, it was eradicated.

Justin: The greatest generation had already taken one in the arm.

Sydnee: [laughs] So, uh, it was gone. But a lot of people have, and the way that they used to administer this vaccine— I mean, there were different ones, but the majority got it this way.

There was a small needle. It was bifurcated, it had two little tips on the end, two prongs, okay? And you would stick it down in a vial of the vaccine liquid, and then you would just... jab it into their deltoid, so in their upper arm...

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: ... like, 15 times.

Justin: Cool.

Sydnee: Just jab-jab-jab-jab-jab-jab-jab-jab. Right?

Justin: Bad. [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] Uh, you will have some bleeding.

Justin: Hmm. And some [holding back laughter] discomfort.

Sydnee: And, I would imagine, [holding back laughter] some discomfort.

Justin: Some mild discomfort.

Sydnee: And, uh, it is not uncommon that you're going to have some sort of skin reaction, right? At the site where you have now been vaccinated, you're going to have some kind of bleeding, scabbing— again, a scar forms. And this distinctive scar could be used as proof. So, if you needed to show that you'd been vaccinated against smallpox, you didn't have to have documentation necessarily, because it was really obvious. You just rolled up your sleeve, showed 'em this scar, and they went, "Yup. That's a smallpox vaccine scar alright."

Um, so could, for that matter, having multiple scars, because surviving smallpox was also, you know, fine. That was an immunity, proof of immunity at that point. You could have an immunity passport as opposed to, like— 'cause they did call it that back then. And immunity passport just meant, "Look at me. I had smallpox." And it could be that simple.

And at this point, it was not uncommon for these things to be checked if you were, say, entering the United States from one of the borders. So, whether it was Canada or Mexico or Ellis Island, you may be asked to show one of these forms of proof. Do you have a piece of paper, or do you have some scars or a scar to show me, to verify that you've been vaccinated against smallpox? Because even at that point, even though this was before the eradication effort that the world took part in and succeeded in, and was really—

Justin: We got tired of foolin' around.

Sydnee: We could really— we could really, like, use that to inspire us at this moment.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But, uh, you could— you know, you could show and get into the country. And then there were also other places where it began to become mandatory. Schools began to mandate, different districts, counties, states, different places throughout the United States started to mandate the smallpox vaccine.

In some industries, um, in order to be employed there you had to get the vaccine and show proof that you had been vaccinated. Um, especially industries like mining, or the railroad, or, like, some factories. Places where you would be in

tight spaces with other people for long periods of time. Um, they were very quick to implement this as requirement. And so if you wanted to come back to work, you had to show a scar, or a vaccine document. Something.

And so it really became this sort of joint effort between public and private interests, right? In some cases, it was a government mandated thing, and in some cases it was really a private business decision. "I'm not gonna hire you if you don't have this vaccine."

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, and a lot of social sort of, uh, arenas of the country also followed suit. So, like, to get into your local... lodge— I don't know.

Justin: In the Elks.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: VFW.

Sydnee: Whatever. They might start requiring. Some of them did. Like, "Well, we really... [out of the corner of her mouth] we only let people in who are vaccinated, so... sorry."

I imagine it was sort of like that.

Justin: Mm-hmm. "Ooh... "

Sydnee: Like that kind of, like, "Eeugh... I'm so embarrassed I have to tell you this, but... "

Justin: "Ooh... yikes! This is awkward, but, uh... "

Sydnee: [laughs] And, uh— and as I said, throughout the 1800's as the vaccine got better we moved from the cowpox to the vaccinia virus, and the vaccine was, you know, more regulated and, um, a better product, so to speak, um, the compulsory administration of this vaccine grew from county to county, country to country. All over the world, people started to mandate. Smallpox was really the beginning of required vaccines.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Um, for good reason, as we talked about. Smallpox was a very dangerous, deadly illness that was very communicable.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So the vaccine was hugely important, and especially since eventually we would figure out we could actually get rid of smallpox, so even more so.

Now, as soon— as we have talked about on the show before, no sooner had we made vaccines and started saving lives than some people decided vaccines were evil, or bad, or...

Justin: Yes?

Sydnee: ... you know, infringing on our liberty.

Justin: They're very challenging people—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —and they've been with us always.

Sydnee: Yes. And they began to fight back against the survival of the human race. Um—

Justin: [snorts] Inspiring.

Sydnee: [laughs] By— and so there were, of course, court battles, and by 1905 the Supreme Court of the United States had already kind of settled the matter that, like, you can mandate vaccines— and along with mandating vaccines I think comes this natural progression to proof of that, right?

Justin: Right. 'Cause what's the point of mandating it if you can't prove that it happened?

Sydnee: Yes. And so in order to participate in certain things, for public good, it is okay that we, um, mandate these vaccines. And we've talked about this on the show before, but I think it's a good reminder that the rhetoric that was used to

fight vaccines then was the same, in many cases, the same rhetoric that we see now. It was the idea of individual liberty. "Why don't I want the vaccine? I don't know. I just don't want it, so I shouldn't have to get it." That kind of thing.

Um, all the way to the— there was a fear that the smallpox immunization scar specifically, that scar that so many people had, was the Biblical Mark of the Beast.

Justin: So busted, guy. You've tried with everything. Give up. Credit card chips? Tamagotchis? I've heard that one.

Sydnee: Tamagotchis?!

Justin: The Mark of the Beast.

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: I don't know.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: I bet somewhere, somebody probably did.

Sydnee: That's interesting. [laughs]

Justin: Maybe he did that with tamagotchis. I don't know.

Sydnee: Um...

Justin: They tried with everything.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Tattoos, come on.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Grow up.

Sydnee: So anyway, uh— so that was sort of the roots of the beginning of the concept of mandating a vaccine, and then thereby needing some sort of proof.

But this wasn't the end, this was just the beginning. And I want to tell you what happened next. But before we do that, let's go to the billing department.

Justin: Let's go!

[ad break]

Justin: Alright, Syd. What's the— what was the next step that we took?

Sydnee: So—

Justin: In vaccine, uh, verification?

Sydnee: As we came up with more vaccines, as we, you know, created more tools to use to prevent deadly and terrible diseases, we needed ways to prove that you've got the vaccine. And so it is not uncommon for you to just use your doctor's records, right? Like, if your pediatrician or family doctor has records of your childhood vaccines, um, health departments keep records of those things. So it's sort of, like, person to person to get their vaccine records.

Um, but it is standard practice to have to show these to attend public school or university, you know? If you want to— I mean, for me, not only did I have to show verification of all the vaccines I had received to go to medical school, um, I had to receive some more and show verification of those. And I also had to have antibody titers drawn, meaning that they had to look at my blood and make sure that I was immune to certain things, like measles, mumps, rubella. Show that not only had I received the vaccine in the past—

Justin: But it was still crankin'.

Sydnee: —but that it was still workin', yeah. Um, so it is not uncommon to have to prove vaccination or immunity in our day-to-day. There are many realms. If you want to hold a newborn child of ours, there are lots of vaccines we're gonna require that you have had. [laughs quietly]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Just... ask my parents.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Um, this became, like, a commonplace idea in society, that vaccines are necessary for the public good. You can have private documents that are accessible to you at your, you know, provider's office that you can go get and show whenever necessary, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, the other common example, though, to kind of go outside of that— 'cause that's again, like, in that personal one-on-one sort of healthcare realm where it's just you and the— you know, you're getting your personal healthcare records to prove it. Um, the other common example is something called the International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis.

Now, that's a big, long name for what at least I have always called the yellow card. And a lot of people refer to it as the yellow card. Why do they call it the yellow card?

Justin: 'Cause it's a yellow card?

Sydnee: Yeah, it's yellow. [laughs quietly]

Justin: That's so confusing, though, 'cause what if they start using a different color? It's like when at Cammack when we had pink slips, and then they started using white. And it's like, I don't— what— what— what do you call this? Pink slips is what you got when you got in trouble, you know, you got detention or whatever, got suspended. You'd get a pink slip.

Sydnee: We used to get this thing called a violation, which sounds really intense now.

Justin: But it wasn't color coded, is what I'm saying.

Sydnee: No, it was just a— I think it was white, but it was just called a violation.

Justin: But anyway, these cards are yellow.

Sydnee: Yes. It is a yellow card. [laughs quietly] And it was created by the International Sanitary Convention that started in 1933 and sort of— it was a process of creating this— these standards and these documents.

And anyway, it was amended in 1944 to mandate that on this card, for travel, you had to prove cholera vaccination, smallpox and typhus vaccination, and then yellow fever either immunity or vaccination. Either you had it and you're immune or you've got the vaccine.

Um, those were the original things that you would always need to include on your yellow card. And what a country decided to do in terms of requirement was really up to them, right? Like, this was a World Health Organization effort to come up with these standards, but it was a country-by-country rule.

So, one country might say you have to have all these things. Another country might say you don't, necessarily. You know? I mean, it wasn't... like, you can look this up now. If you're going to travel, you have to look this up, because we're gonna get to, there's still one vaccine that this is very relevant for. Um, and over the years this would be changed and updated. Some things would start to drop off, like the cholera vaccine is not really particularly effective and we have better treatments for it so, like, we don't get that anymore, right? Who's gotten a cholera vaccine?

Justin: Not me.

Sydnee: Yeah, most of us haven't. So— and then the smallpox vaccine. We eradicated it. Woo! So we don't have to get that anymore.

So things would fall off of the list. Um, and so now it is mainly used to provide proof of vaccination to yellow fever. That is the primary use. Now, it can be— there's plenty of room on a yellow card to put all your vaccines.

Justin: Yeah. Gotta catch 'em all.

Sydnee: All your vaccines, and a place to put something like prophylaxis. Like, let's say you're going to a country where malaria is endemic and you're taking malaria prophylaxis, you could put that on your yellow card. So there's room for all these other things, and a lot of people get confused and think that it's a yellow card because it's about yellow fever. This is not true. It's just 'cause it's yellow.

Justin: Got it.

Sydnee: That's just a— that's just, you know, coincidence. Convenient coincidence. All mine has on it now is yellow fever, because there are certain countries around the world that not only can you not go to if you can't— like, they won't let you come in unless you have your yellow card that proves you've been vaccinated against yellow fever, um, you can't even travel through them.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So you have to be really careful. Like, if you're going to travel abroad, check about yellow fever vaccination, because if you have a connecting flight through a certain country, you might end up not being able to get where you're going, because— because yellow fever can be so bad. And it can be deadly, and we really want to stop letting people go get it and spread and— well, not spread it, but get it, right? You don't spread it. Mosquitoes spread it.

Justin: Got it.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] We'd rather the mosquitoes stop getting on planes!

Justin: Yes! Just keep our mosquitoes off planes! Charge those guys!

Sydnee: Why are they doing this? Why are they traveling on planes and getting— how are they even getting tickets?

Justin: Why can mosquitoes travel on planes but I'm not allowed to?! Come on! Come on, Biden!

Sydnee: And the thing is, these mandatory vaccines for travel, we know, helped encourage people to get these vaccines. Like for instance in the case of smallpox, all of these different pressures that I've already mentioned, public pressures when it came to school and things, um, or, like, the military could require a smallpox vaccination, private pressures where, like, you couldn't go to your social club or you couldn't have your mining job or whatever unless you got these vaccines, plus travel pressures.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: "Look, you can't come to our country if you haven't been vaccinated against smallpox, because we're trying to, you know, get rid of it, and we don't want you bringing it here. So, get your vaccine if you wanna come visit."

Um, all of those things definitely contributed, I mean, in huge part to the eventual eradication of smallpox.

So there's precedent, and there are several arguments to be made that this is not only necessary but kind of inevitable, you know? 'Cause we've seen this play out before.

Now, there are a couple of factors to move into, like, if we were going to do this—and again, no one is doing this in the US right now. This is not a federal law, rule, mandate. Nobody is investigating, you know— there's a lot of sort of fear mongering about, "The federal government is gonna come out and demand you—" I mean, that's just not happening right now.

Um, but one thing to consider is that other countries are already doing a form of this. Israel has a green pass, and multiple European countries are also looking into a digital green certificate, which would be the same thing. It's a proof of vaccination against COVID-19. Hawaii and New York are both considering this idea, and New York is already testing one that's like a beta testing of something called the Excelsior Pass.

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: Uh, Israel, by the way, has, I think, one of if not the adoption rates of the vaccine on the planet. I saw today they just lifted a mask mandate for outdoor activities, so exceptional is their spread of vaccinations.

Sydnee: Yes, yes. Um, they have done an impressive job in vaccinating people, collecting data, proving the vaccines worked, reassuring people about a lot of the data we have that shows that at this point we very much believe not only can you— not only does this vaccine protect you from dying from COVID, from being hospitalized with COVID, from getting COVID, but also from spreading COVID. A lot of that has come out of Israel.

So, you know, we've seen success in countries, and they're already sort of doing this. China has a digital passport, and multiple tourist destinations have begun to advertise that you can visit with no testing or quarantine if you can provide. So they're not requiring it. And this is sort of like the way it'll go, right?

Like, "You can— we really want you to come because we're a touristy spot on the planet and that's how we— you know, that's how we pay our bills is usually with tourist dollars, and we want you to come back. But right now, if you come you have to get tested before and you got to quarantine for so many days, and it's a whole hassle. But if you get that vaccine and you prove it, you don't have to do all that stuff. You can just show up, show us your card, you're good."

And so I think again that's that soft pressure, right? "If you do this, your life can be more convenient and fun, so you should get the vaccine. We're not requiring it, we're just... incentivizing it."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, so with all that in mind, why shouldn't we, then? What are some of the arguments against? Other than... Mark of the Beast things. Like, what are some real, logical arguments against it?

Justin: Um... I mean, I have some, but I'd love to hear yours.

Sydnee: What— do you have any thoughts? Do you wanna— do you wanna venture a guess before I start telling you—

Justin: I mean, I don't have to guess. I know what my concerns are. I don't think we should be— I don't think... I want to withhold my issues with it, because you always— you'll make me look dumb—

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: —if you address this stuff before I say it, so I wanna hear, to see if you address my— my— my issues and concerns.

Sydnee: I have— for me, it's a timing issue. I have some real concerns now. I think that Sydnee of the future would feel very different. But the right now—

Justin: Well, she's gonna have her hoverboots and, you know.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: [laughs] Nutrient— nutrient pills. [through laughter] She's not gonna have time to worry about COVID.

Sydnee: I can zoom high above the Earth.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Above COVID. [laughs] Leave COVID below me.

Justin: Do you need a— do you need a vaccine verification to go to Mars? 'Cause that's what Sydnee of the future will be thinking about.

Sydnee: Actually yes, we should do, but that's...

Justin: Yes. No COVID on Mars!

Sydnee: No COVID on Mars!

There is a feeling that right now is just too soon.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: There is still transmission of the virus at various levels in various places that is still quite high, right? Um, the vaccines aren't 100%. They're really, really good. No vaccine is 100%. That's just— they just aren't.

And so the idea that this is a cure-all. We just give— get your verification and do whatever you want.

Justin: [simultaneously] This won't fix it.

Sydnee: No. We're not quite there yet. So, I mean, there's one argument which is it's not that this is a bad idea, it's that you're pushing it, you're rushing it. Certainly in the US we are not ready to just give people their cards and let them go travel willy-nilly. We're just not there.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Not that we won't be. We're just not there yet.

Also, along these same lines, the distribution of the vaccines from country to country is, predictably, far from equitable. Some places, like the US, are vaccinating 3 million people a day.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Which is good. We got a lot of people, so got a ways to go, but we're doing good. There are other countries where they're still struggling to get vaccines to front-line healthcare workers.

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: So if we're going to start this sort of global effort, as we have done in the past, to create, you know, a vaccine verification, and make it mandatory for international travel, it's really inequitable, because there are going to be certain countries where their citizens are traveling a lot sooner than other countries who are lagging behind because they haven't been given the resources and the support, and they don't have the money and the leverage and the power to get their people the vaccine, right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So there are some issues with that, too. And then when you look within each country, it's the same thing, right? What I just described is a global problem. Well, look state to state, county to county, city to city, neighborhood to neighborhood. This same problem is happening within the US as well. Black Americans have received the vaccine at half the rate of white Americans, and Hispanic Americans are even less than that.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So if we're gonna start saying, like, this is your magic ticket, and everybody who has it can go do whatever they want and if you don't have it you're still stuck in your house... well, that's a pretty lousy thing to say right now, when statistically if you're white you're way more likely to have been able to access the vaccine, be fully immune, and go do whatever you want.

Justin: And to not have the historically-based hesitancy about, you know, this sort of thing, which I think minorities in this country... there is a lot of that hesitancy, and I think it is well... [laughs quietly] well-earned? I mean, I don't

know how else to say it. I mean, I don't— there's not a more delicate way of saying it. I get it. Like, I mean, yeah, for sure. We've documented on this show, like, the many, many ways that we have mistreated minorities, specifically the medical establishment in this country, so.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: I get it.

Sydnee: Absolutely. There is— it is completely understandable that, especially in the United States, if you are a Black American and you do not trust the medical system, well, we haven't given you many reasons to, have we? And so I think that is understandable, and the impetus has been on us for a long time, long before a pandemic and a COVID-19 vaccine that we desperately need everyone to get, the impetus has been on us, the healthcare system. I guess I am the— I really don't wanna be the representative for the American healthcare system.

Justin: Hey, hon, on this show it's either you or me. [laughs quietly]

Sydnee: Yeah, I know.

Justin: And I don't think I'm a better representative for the American healthcare system.

Sydnee: As much as I—

Justin: I dropped a TV on my finger when I was four!

Sydnee: [simultaneously] Hey, listen—[laughs quietly]

Justin: Come on!

Sydnee: I am a doctor, and I love taking care of people. I couldn't hate the American healthcare system more than I do.

Justin: That's fair.

Sydnee: I couldn't feel more nauseated by it, but I understand. And we have not done a good job of trying to make right our many, many wrongs, um, and still committing those wrongs today. That is absolutely the truth.

So, with all that, how do you just— I mean, it's really, this is such a privileged thing at this moment, if that is what we do next. Is, "There's your card! Go have fun, go on cruises, go all over the world, do whatever you want. You're the winner. Take off your mask and have fun."

It's just wrong. Right? It feels wrong. It is wrong. We're not there. We gotta wait longer, and we need to make sure that everyone has access to the vaccine before we start talking about this kind of thing, and that's not true right now.

And then, of course, there are privacy concerns with digital stuff. So a lot of the talk has been, if we were gonna pursue this— and this is the model that they've used in some other countries— is instead of the— you know, I have a physical yellow card that has my yellow fever vaccination record on it. It is a piece of paper that I keep in my passport so that it is with me every time I travel. Not that I need it a lot of the time, but it's with me.

What we're talking about in a lot of these concerns is not a physical thing. It would be something that you could have on your phone, and you could show or whatever you—

Justin: Right, which means it's in the cloud.

Sydnee: Yes. And there are a lot of concerns with, like, this general distrust of the government—

Justin: [crosstalk]

Sydnee: —and data collection, and...

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: ... and all that kind of stuff.

Justin: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sydnee: Um, that is not particularly my concern. I am happy to let the government know that I have been vaccinated to whatever, but...

Justin: It depends on what we— are we granting new powers to the government to restrict movement based on that?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: That makes— that starts to get sketchier.

Sydnee: It does, it does, and I think that's always a concern, if we're gonna leave it in the hands of government entities to decide what they do with your information. I mean, mostly for me they just push me ads for kids' clothing on Facebook. [laughs quietly]

Justin: I don't— I just don't think, um... I don't think we should do this. I don't think we should ever do this.

Sydnee: Why?

Justin: Well... okay.

Sydnee: 'Cause my— see, again, everything I'm saying is a "not now" problem.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: I'm not saying a "not ever" problem.

Justin: Okay. Once vaccines are widely— like, we're talking about a hypothetical where vaccines are widely available, right? Anybody can walk into a place to get the vaccine, correct? In this hypothetical future.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Do you want to lump in kids? Can kids get the vaccine in this hypothetical future? Is that a— are we at a point where, like, kids can get the vaccine if they want?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Okay. I don't think that we should be spending resources on creating a system like this. I think we should be spending resources on, like, showing the— like, why people should be getting the vaccine, encouraging them to get it,

education, um, all that stuff. I don't see why— because at a certain point, if everybody can get the vaccine, then I think that you— personal choice does come into it. Like, you don't— fine, like, you're taking the risk, but it is you taking the risk. And if you want to get the vaccine, then you can get the vaccine.

Like, those are the two... right? I mean...

Sydnee: But there are still people who won't be able to get this vaccine.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And there are going to be people for whom it is not effective. Not a lot, but that's—

Justin: Do you mean, like, medically speaking?

Sydnee: Yes. Yeah, I mean that there are people who, for medical reasons, will not be able to receive these vaccines.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And don't— I mean, I think that that is— that is the whole thing with public health. We have to create a system in which we protect people who cannot, for medical reasons, get the vaccine, or who get the vaccine and maybe they have some immunosuppression, they don't respond the same way, and they're not necessarily protected by the vaccine.

Justin: It's not about whether or not I think the people who are immunosuppressed and can't get the vaccine should be able to leave their house. I'm not talking about that. I'm saying that we get there quicker through education and, like... basically politicking for this thing, versus— 'cause, like, it stands to reason that— my logic would be, if this thing is so great and safe and effective, everybody should want to get it, right?

So we shouldn't need to mandate people getting it. It should be something that everybody wants to get. So how do we get to that point? Like, how do we get to that— that— that point?

Sydnee: I agree with you that that step has to come first. I am not— I am— again, this is why I do not think this would work now, or should happen right

now. I am not in favor of this as a now thing, because I think you're right. We need to do more work and a lot better work educating people as to why they should get the vaccine, and making them comfortable with it.

Justin: We're also— so I can clarify, right? We're not even in the— like, we can't even with this— because it is, like, a version of coronavirus, we're not talking about eradication. Like, that's not even on the table.

Sydnee: Right now, that— no, that is not the conversation. It is very much proof of vaccination so that you can allow people to move around without the risk of creating outbreaks.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Um, that is all that they're talking about at this point. And I think that as— using this as precedent, using this as historical precedent, everything I just said... having to prove that you were vaccinated against smallpox somehow, or that you already had it... it did help get it out there more. People did get the vaccine who weren't necessarily anti-vax, but were a little nervous and had heard the stuff about it and knew it was probably safe, but just weren't ready to take that step. By the enticement of getting to do things was pressure that encouraged people to do it.

Justin: Who is keeping— but, like, who has the ability—

Sydnee: I mean, but we've got historical precedent for it!

Justin: I'm not disagreeing with that. Who has the ability to do that gatekeeping? Who is the person that you're gonna hand that power over to, and say, "You can decide who gets in and out."

Sydnee: Private industry can do it. I mean, any business— I mean, any group can do it already.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: If you want to say all of your workers— now, I think they'll wait until the vaccines— you know, 'cause they all got emergency use authorization, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And that is not typically... so, like, I am mandated to get a flu vaccine in my job.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I would anyway. But I'm mandated. Um, if for some reason I medically cannot get it, then I— I'd have to wear a mask all the time at work, which doesn't seem so strange now.

Um, but I am mandated to. And that's fine. I mean, I think that's... okay. Again, I couldn't attend medical school until I had received all my vaccines and proven. I wasn't allowed to travel to certain countries until I had proven that I had been vaccinated.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: All those things I think are fine, and this will be an extension of that. Not now, but eventually, it will be the same thing. Do you really want to have your healthcare workers possibly— what if you're sick and you have a— a doctor or a nurse or somebody who walks into your room and hasn't been vaccinated against COVID, and could give you COVID?

Justin: They can't give me COVID. I'm vaccinated against COVID.

Sydnee: Well, I'm saying, what if you're not?

Justin: Why didn't I get vaccinated against COVID?!

Sydnee: Maybe you couldn't!

Justin: [sighs] The— the—

Sydnee: This is public health. This is what herd immunity is. It's we all stand up and do our part and get vaccinated to protect the herd. This is what it is.

Justin: What percentage—

Sydnee: A year ago we said what it wasn't.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Now we're getting to what it is.

Justin: What percentage of people are we talking about who can't? Like, because if there's a percentage of people that cannot get the vaccine, that is also something that has not been widely, like... discussed or talked about. Is that— is that a— I'm not— obviously everybody has the right to be— to be safe. I'm not saying, like, "Well, oh well. Tough noogies."

But, like, is that a statistically significant— what— who are the people that can't get—

Sydnee: Yeah! Any— anyone— okay. Anyone who is on— so, no. The only reason you can't get the vaccine is if you're allergic to it.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Okay? So you're right, that's going to be very few people. However—

Justin: Okay, that is what I was referring to.

Sydnee: —anybody who is immunosuppressed... they can get the vaccine, maybe, but they're less likely to respond to it. And so they still need prote— they still, theoretically, need extra protection. Maybe the vaccine works in them just fine, but we don't have the assurance of that. And so... there— I mean, they can do everything that they can do and still be at risk, and then again, I think they have a right to be able to go outside of their home, just like we do.

Justin: It's true. I hadn't— I hadn't— when I had formulated these— these— it's just—[sighs] The point that some people, even vaccinated people, will not be as safe is a very good one, and not one that I had necessarily folded— it just makes me so nervous when we start talking about, like— the way that power has been used in this country, like whenever— when we've given power to either corporations or the government, I think especially in light of the past few years, um, and, you know— but, like, throughout the entirety of the American experiment, like, I think time has shown that, like, if you give power to the government or corporations, they will not quickly cede that power back to you, or that database, or that information, or whatever, because the threat has passed. Right? Like, consider what we did after 9/11. The amount of, like, liberty, both

digital and physical, that we eschewed and, like, gave to the government in a rush to protect ourselves. Right?

Sydnee: I agree with that. I understand that.

Justin: And I don't want to sound like a conspiracy theorist here. But, like, we didn't get those back, right? The— the— they didn't stop tapping phones and everything because the— whatever—[laughs] whatever the danger had passed. Like...

Sydnee: This is why I think— and I think—

Justin: I'm just saying it should be handled with trepidation, and should be— is that the best and smartest way of doing it?

Sydnee: It should be— it's not just what it should be handled with, it's who it should be handled by.

Justin: Who do you tr— who do you trust?

Sydnee: I should be handled by public health professionals who have devoted their life and study and service to knowing these things, to understanding the risks and benefits, and to enacting polices that protect people, while infringing on our individual liberties as little as possible. And there are people whose job it is to know this. And if we listen to them and not to random politicians who just say whatever they think people wanna hear, then we will get somewhere.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: It's the same thing we've seen in this state with a number of issues. We have politicians making decisions on things like, how do we deal with addiction and recovery and needle exchange programs?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Well, the public health professionals say one thing, but I'm a politician, I'll do something different.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: If we leave it in the hands of public health professionals, this can be done right. And I do believe that part of that will eventually be a verification process. I believe eventually there will pro— there will be a day, I would guess, that you have to prove this to go to school.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: That's probably gonna be true. And I guarantee you there will be a day that I would not be allowed to go do my job in the hospital without a proof of vaccination against COVID-19. I guarantee you that day will come. And I think that that is fine. But public health professionals have to make those decisions.

Justin: I just don't— I guess my trust with, like... giving—

Sydnee: Fauci?!

Justin: Not Fauci! Fauci isn't— like, I'm not talking— Fauci's not gonna be the guy standing in— in, like...

Sydnee: People like Fauci make these policies.

Justin: They can make the policies, but they're not gonna be the ones enforcing them.

Sydnee: Oh, well that's...

Justin: I'm sorry! That's— I— I— it gives me a lot of trepidation. Like, it makes me nervous.

Sydnee: I know. But it— it's worked well in— in West Virginia, we have some of the strongest— I know you're gonna be shocked at this— some of the strongest vaccination laws in terms of especially kids in public schools in the country, and it works really well for us. And it is a good, strong policy that should not be reversed. And even— even in our legislature, when people challenge it, it doesn't stick. We still stick with the good rules.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Even here.

Justin: One of the few things that we've— we nailed.

Sydnee: The thing is, uh... the vaccines are our way out of this. This is how we get out of this. I mean, that just continues to be true. I want to hug people when I see them, and shake their hands. And I want to see their faces again. I want to fly on planes. I want to be in crowds. I want to be smushed side-by-side with people watching a band play again someday. I want those things.

Justin: Well... we're maybe a little old for that.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly]

Justin: But yeah, I see what you're saying.

Sydnee: Um, we got through this—

Justin: [through laughter] We'll see— we'll see B— see Blippi. Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with other adults.

Sydnee: [laughs quietly] Many of us got through this alone. Because we had to, to protect other people. And it's been really hard to get through it alone, and I think that it's beautiful that the thing we do now to end it is the thing we do together, which is we go get our vaccines. It's the— it— it needs to be the unifying experience that we all have to end this period of solitude. You go and you get your vaccine. And once you've done that, to save lives, to preserve the human race, if you will—[laughs] not really, but sure, tell yourself that. To be part of the solution, and not part of the problem. When you've done that, why would you not want a badge of honor to show? Why would you not want a certificate of accomplishment? I mean... it's the best participation trophy you will ever get in your life.

Justin: I'm not— I don't— I don't disagree. I think that that is a lovely sentiment, for sure. I just don't trust—[quietly] I don't trust the government.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: I just don't trust the government, Syd.

Sydnee: But you still want everybody to get vaccinated, right?

Justin: Yeah! I mean—

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: —that's the cornerstone of my whole thing! Is, like, everybody should be getting vaccinated. We should just be proving to people that it's safe and effective.

Sydnee: I think that because there has been such a vacuum of good, solid public health discourse for a while— not by all entities, I'm not, you know, throwing shade at everybody who's involved in public health, but I think on a broad level, there's been such a vacuum. There is so much conspiracy that's been allowed to flourish, so much— flourish, so much misunderstanding of this, that people are just proceeding with so much caution. But it's a— to build back the trust that we have lost as a medical community, as a public health force for good, to build that back... I mean, it's a long road.

Justin: Agreed. Agreed. Go get a vacci— hey.

Sydnee: Go get your—

Justin: If you're listening to this— vaccine. If you're listening to this show—

Sydnee: And it's accessible to you. 'Cause there are still places that aren't like West Virginia.

Justin: Absolutely. Obviously, coda.

Sydnee: Like, here you can just go get it now.

Justin: Yeah. Oh, it's everywhere. Come on down!

Sydnee: Come—[laughs quietly]

Justin: I don't think they're looking at licenses anymore.

Sydnee: I don't— yeah. I don't know if they are. It's worth a shot. Come to West Virginia.

Justin: Yeah. Come on down. Come—

Sydnee: No, I shouldn't say that. No.

Justin: —come visit. No. Um, but, like, if you're listening to this show and you could get your vaccine and you haven't, I feel like you've been listening to this show, but maybe you haven't been hearing this show.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: If I can be— put— put a finer point on it. And I mean, I'm so conflicted about this one, and I feel like people are gonna yell at me, because anytime that I'm not 100% sure of myself and I start trying to figure stuff out while recording a podcast, people tend to get mad at me for it. But, like, I do— like, I do look at the history of this country and... most countries. But, like, this country. And, like, it makes me frigging nervous. It makes me, like... what happens when there's a fee? What happens when there's a \$20 charge to get this?

Sydnee: I agree. I agree.

Justin: Like, I'm— I'm not— I think it is wild to jump into something like that and not have some trepidation about making sure it is executed in a fair and equitable fashion.

Sydnee: I agree with all of that. That is exactly why I said all that, because I think there are— there's a ton of thought that has to go into this, and it can't just be something that we— again, you can't just get your card and it's your magic ticket and you go do whatever you want. I agree with you completely. I would just say that eventually, a form of this will happen. This is coming, eventually. And you're right, to get my yellow fever vaccine, I paid. I paid money to get that yellow fever vaccine that I put on my yellow card, and then was able to go places. So, I mean, you're not wrong.

Justin: I wanna get *that* isolated as a text message alert, too. "You're not wrong." Just you telling me that.

Sydnee: But go get your vaccine.

Justin: Come on!

Sydnee: As soon as it is available to you and your appointment time comes up. I know not everybody can just go get it, like we can here right now. Gosh, that is so weird to say.

Justin: So swanky, living in West Virginia, right? [laughs]

Sydnee: West Virginia.

Justin: Can't go to a—[wheezes] can't go to a Whole Foods, [through laughter] but dang it, we can get as many vaccines as we want!

Sydnee: I can't even... anyway, but go— but yes, when it is your turn, please get vaccinated. Please.

Justin: Um, that's gonna do it for us. Thank you so much for listening to our podcast. We hope you have enjoyed yourself. We got a book. It's called *The Sawbones Book*. You can get it... at book places. Um, so if you like this show and you want, uh, to get, um... [through laughter] you're ready to take the next step?

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: That's the best— the best way of doing it. Uh, thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song, "Medicines," as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to you for listening. We'll be back with you soon. 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]

[chord]

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