

## **Sawbones 11: The One Problem With Benjamin Rush**

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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 am your co-host, Justin McElroy.

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

**Justin:** Sydnee, what are we talking about today? I'm excited.

**Sydnee:** Well, Justin, I feel like we've spent several... I don't know how many weeks we've been doing this. What, probably about 35 weeks now?

**Justin:** This is week 11.

**Sydnee:** Oh, okay. Close.

**Justin:** Week 11.

**Sydnee:** Close. Talking... You know, really talking down the medical profession.

**Justin:** Sure. Well, you guys have done a lot of, like, wicked bad stuff.

**Sydnee:** Okay, well, obviously. And like I said, we've spent the last 74 weeks talking about that.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** [laughs] But, you know, as a physician myself, I would like to point out that there are some stars in our sky of medical history. Is that a good metaphor?

**Justin:** So you've found a hero of medical history.

**Sydnee:** I think so. I scoured the records, and I found somebody that I really think we can talk about just his successes in the world of medicine.

That really, truly exemplifies what it means to be a physician and to just take really good care of people. And be an all-around good person.

**Justin:** So no bad things?

**Sydnee:** No bad stuff whatsoever. Just good, old-fashioned nose to the grindstone hard work, research, and medicine.

**Justin:** Okay. Sounds like a great combination. Sydnee, who are we talking about? Who is the man of the hour?

**Sydnee:** We're going to talk about Benjamin Rush.

**Justin:** Benjamin Rush, Hero of Medicine.

**Sydnee:** Hero of Medicine. Do you know anything about Benjamin Rush?

**Justin:** Not. A. Thing.

**Sydnee:** Well let me tell you some things. First of all, Benjamin was born in 1746 in Pennsylvania.

**Justin:** Good start.

**Sydnee:** He grew up on a plantation. He was one of seven children. He was educated at the College of New Jersey, which would later become [snooty voice] Princeton.

And he attended med school in Edinburgh, Scotland. He was also fluent in Spanish, French and Italian. And presumably English.

**Justin:** Okay. One would hope.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** This would become quite the success story if not. Making your way in 1700s America.

**Sydnee:** When he returned to the colonies, he opened his own practice and he taught chemistry and he actually published the first chemistry textbook.

**Justin:** Wow.

**Sydnee:** But if you've heard of him, it's probably because he was one of the founding fathers of this nation and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

**Justin:** Wow, that's really impressive.

**Sydnee:** I know. He was a physician, he was a writer, he was a teacher, he was a humanitarian. He served as surgeon general, to the Continental Army. Did you know that?

**Justin:** I didn't. I told you, I mean literally everything here is fresh ground for me. I mean, anything you give me here. I'm like a babe in the woods.

**Sydnee:** He was instrumental in early preventative military medicine. He went and evaluated how we were caring for soldiers on the front lines during the early battles of the revolutionary war.

He was a huge supporter of the revolutionary war, and he actually would have continued to do so, except he called out one of his superior physicians for misappropriating goods that were supposed to go to soldiers.

**Justin:** Wow.

**Sydnee:** Food and wine and stuff.

**Justin:** So not only sort of a hero of the battlefield but also a moral man.

**Sydnee:** Definitely a moral man. He was also a leader in the abolitionist movement.

**Justin:** Oh, great. That is of course the people who fought for slavery... being illegal...

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** ... later.

**Sydnee:** They fought against slavery, may be a better way to put that.

**Justin:** That's a more conventional stating, but I was reading from one of their brochures, and right here it says they "fought for slavery to be illegal later."

That's what it says.

**Sydnee:** Right. And they specifically wanted it to be illegal later.

**Justin:** "Free the slaves!"

**Sydnee:** "We're not in a hurry..."

**Justin:** "Free the slaves soon-ish!"

**Sydnee:** "Whenever it's convenient for you! Please."

**Justin:** "We're mad as hell and we're only going to take it for a moderate amount of time after this announcement!"

**Sydnee:** "Thank you for your attention!"

**Justin:** "Thank you for your attention!"

**Sydnee:** He was, in addition to advocating for the rights of slaves, he advocated for free public schools.

**Justin:** Love it.

**Sydnee:** He sought for improved education for women.

**Justin:** Good. Great.

**Sydnee:** More reform in our penal system.

**Justin:** [snorts]

**Sydnee:** I knew you'd laugh at that.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] It was a good joke. You wrote a good joke.

**Sydnee:** He was a leader in the enlightenment of America.

He also, as a physician, promoted public health as well as personal health, community hygiene.

He was one of the first people, even before we really understood that there were germs that could be in water and that people could be exposed to, he figured out that if he helped re-route this creek that it would reduce the rates of cholera and typhus and typhoid and all kinds of illnesses in the area.

He did that, which was a great public health service.

**Justin:** So he didn't know about germs, per se, but he... What, he just knew there was some bad water?

**Sydnee:** Well, he believed in research and the idea that there was empiric evidence, there was a way to figure things out.

He didn't do a lot of that, but he understood that there was a way to systematically figure out an answer to a problem.

**Justin:** Okay. Real man of science, I like that.

**Sydnee:** He was! He wrote the first case report ever on dengue fever. He created the first public dispensary, so that low-income families could get medications.

**Justin:** Wow.

**Sydnee:** That's pretty cool.

**Justin:** Pretty awesome.

**Sydnee:** He was also, many people know him, for his contributions to psychiatric illness, to the whole idea of American psychiatry.

He was the first one to claim that addiction was a disease.

**Justin:** Wow.

**Sydnee:** He also believed that there was a way to morally treat patients with psychiatric illness. So he went into the asylums and said "Let's..."

You know, I mean, they were basically places with dungeons, where we chained up people who were mentally ill, and he said—

**Justin:** Yeah. We got into that a little bit in the lobotomy episode. Horrific treatment of the mentally ill throughout history.

**Sydnee:** Absolutely.

And he stepped in and said, "This is not the way to treat these people. We need to get them out of the chains and into a regular hospital setting, help them, treat them well, put them to work, give them things that they can do and make them invested in their own health."

**Justin:** Awesome. Awesome. It's so nice to hear a real, medical... You know, a real medical hero.

**Sydnee:** He really was, Justin. So, everybody take a minute today and celebrate Benjamin Rush.

Well... Thank you guys. This has been *Sawbones*—

**Justin:** Wait, Sydnee. First off, it is in the terms of our prenuptial agreement that I do sign-offs for any and all podcasts that we co-host together.

**Sydnee:** Oh, of course. Well, go ahead. Start that sign off right... Now.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** No, right about... Now.

**Justin:** Okay. You're in a real rush to get to the sign off.

**Sydnee:** A Benjamin Rush, might you say?

**Justin:** Okay. I'm going to let that one slide. You really want to get to ending the show.

**Sydnee:** No. No. I don't think so.

**Justin:** No?

**Sydnee:** No. Mm-mm. No. I just think.... I mean, what else do we need to say? I think we're good.

**Justin:** Sydnee...

**Sydnee:** I think we're about good.

**Justin:** Sydnee...

**Sydnee:** I think a tight seven-minute show is about all we need.

**Justin:** Sydnee...

**Sydnee:** Thank you guys.

**Justin:** Sydnee...

**Sydnee:** Let's hit that Taxpayers song. Everybody loves that song.

**Justin:** Sydnee... Is there something you're not telling me about Benjamin Rush?

**Sydnee:** [high-pitched] What would I not be telling you about Benjamin Rush?

**Justin:** Well, you're talking like that, which leads me to believe that you definitely, definitely are not telling me something about Benjamin Rush.

**Sydnee:** There's like one thing... I mean, there are things... Everybody did things in their life, I don't know that we necessarily need to include it in this episode.

**Justin:** Well, I don't think it could hurt. Why don't you go ahead and just hit me with it? Just to give people a full—

I'm sure Benjamin Rush doesn't have any really notable skeletons in his closet, but why don't you go ahead and just hit me with it.

**Sydnee:** Well, I mean he just... You know, even though he was part of the Continental Congress and he signed the Declaration of Independence, he wrote some nasty letters about George Washington.

That was pretty much it. I mean, he almost got fired but then he felt bad about it and he wrote some nice things, and it's all okay. It's all okay. No big deal, really.

**Justin:** That... That's it?

**Sydnee:** Pretty much.



**Justin:** Okay. Uh, why don't you go ahead and tell me the other thing that you are definitely, definitely not telling me?

**Sydnee:** Well, you know that whole thing about how he was an abolitionist?

**Justin:** Yes. I remember. Remember we had that great bit about freeing the slaves later.

**Sydnee:** Right. Exactly. You didn't know what abolitionist meant.

**Justin:** Right. No, wrong.

**Sydnee:** So he wrote this really great pamphlet, about how we shouldn't own slaves, in 1773. Which is confusing, because allegedly he then bought a slave in 1776.

**Justin:** Okay. Um... Alright? He... He was just excited about the nation being free?

**Sydnee:** I guess that was how he celebrated?

**Justin:** He bought a slave. Treated himself to a person?

**Sydnee:** Not the best way—

**Justin:** No. Not the best at all.

**Sydnee:** And I'd like to say it was just one of those crazy things that you do like—

**Justin:** Sure. Vegas weddings.

**Sydnee:** You know, in your twenties—

**Justin:** Meth.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] But as of 1784, when he joined the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, he still, as far as we know, he still owned the slave...

**Justin:** Oh my God.

**Sydnee:** ... that he bought, because he kind of took him to the meeting.

**Justin:** [laughs hard] What?!

**Sydnee:** Well, I mean, I don't think he was with him in the room, but, like, I think he travelled with him. Like, hung out in the hotel. That just seems odd. It seems odd.

**Justin:** Okay, why wouldn't you mention this before?

**Sydnee:** Well, I mean... I don't know.

**Justin:** That's it though, right? I mean...

**Sydnee:** Well, okay. When I say that it seems odd, I guess I should clarify. If you look at his beliefs on the difference between white people and black people, if you look at that, it isn't really that odd, I guess.

**Justin:** In context.

**Sydnee:** In context of his beliefs.

**Justin:** Wait. Okay, what beliefs?

**Sydnee:** It's... Well, okay, so in 1792 he wrote a statement that basically... I mean, pretty much said that being black was a disease akin to leprosy.

**Justin:** Okay. So not great.

**Sydnee:** He thought it was curable and that if you lived a good, clean life you could become white.

**Justin:** Who is this man?

**Sydnee:** Okay, so he wasn't really that great of a guy.

**Justin:** Yeah. Yeah, he sounds like kind of definitely not a great guy.

**Sydnee:** Actually, not only not that great but maybe not that bright.

He based all this on the idea that there was a slave, who probably had vitiligo, which is a condition that can make someone who is of darker skin become lighter skinned.

And so he thought that, hey, maybe everybody who's African American can become white and he had this whole idea that we can cure that.

So he went on to write a paper that basically said white people and black people shouldn't get married.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Oh, wonderful.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] That's fantastic.

**Sydnee:** You know, when we start to talk about it, he's not really such a great guy now.

**Justin:** No. I mean, in the context of, well, people and humanity, not a great dude. Got some things right though.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, umm...

**Justin:** But that's all he got wrong. He had outdated views on race and that's very unfortunate.

**Sydnee:** He had pretty outdated views on some other things. He advocated for separate schools for men and women.

**Justin:** Okay...

**Sydnee:** Basically, the idea being that we'll teach women about poetry and art and music, and then we'll teach men math and logic, because women can't do that.

And then we should also teach women the idea of republic and motherhood.

**Justin:** [laughs] Just really patriotic.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, just to sit at home and, I don't know, sing military songs to your kids or something? [laughs]

And you know—

**Justin:** My mom is an odd person... Before you come over and play Nintendo, I do want to warn you, she sings "You're a grand old flag/You're a high-flyin' flag" at the top of her lungs at inopportune moments.

Just a quick warning, quick heads up.

**Sydnee:** And she's probably going to make you sew an American flag.

**Justin:** Yeah. And she makes American flag shaped cookies, and she has a tattoo of a bald eagle on her hip. She shows it to company.

**Sydnee:** Just to warn you.

**Justin:** Just to warn you. You know, it's a good reminder, Sydnee, I think that as we look throughout history, some of these people who were right about things they were experts in....

He was obvious right on everything medically, could have some pretty outdated social views, you know? It's an interesting dichotomy.

**Sydnee:** Well, that would be true, Justin, if he were right about medicine.

**Justin:** Uh-oh.

**Sydnee:** But he actually... There were a lot of areas where he was off the mark there too.

So Benjamin Rush probably shed more blood than any man in history.

**Justin:** [laughs] Oh no!

**Sydnee:** I won't talk about bloodletting, because we talked about it before, but he was a big proponent of bloodletting. Which is interesting because we're getting into the era where it was falling out of favor.

**Justin:** He was kind of the last guy wearing leisure suits. The last guy at the disco not wanting to give up that Studio 54 dream.

**Sydnee:** A lot of European doctors were saying like, "Really, we should stop that." And he said, "No."

And as a result, he probably contributed to the deaths of both George Washington and Ben Franklin.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Hey, congratulations, Benjamin Rush! You did it. We didn't need them anyway.

**Sydnee:** One of the best is, he was involved in the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, which he kind of started off badly, because he thought it was caused by the smell of rotting coffee beans along the Delaware River.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** In case you were wondering, it wasn't.

**Justin:** It wasn't, no. That's not a [crosstalk]—

**Sydnee:** ... caused by yellow fever.

**Justin:** Yeah. Yellow fever. Well, he must have been so confused when people kept calling it the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793, when he kept trying to get the Bad Coffee Smell of Today Epidemic of Right Now.

**Sydnee:** And you know, most of these people he just wanted to treat with bleeding, that was his favorite way to treat people.

**Justin:** Or fresh coffee.

**Sydnee:** But... [laughs] You know, it's a wonder he didn't come up with that.

**Justin:** Yeah. "Here, let me crack open this arabica. Mmm."

**Sydnee:** That could be a whole new Folgers commercial.

**Justin:** "It'll cure your yellow fever."

"Note. Will not actually cure your yellow fever."

**Sydnee:** He also advocated wrapping people in vinegar-soaked blankets until they would sweat it out. You could also then unwrap 'em and bath them in mercury and cold water.

**Justin:** Mm. Well...

**Sydnee:** Mercury [crosstalk].

**Justin:** I mean, you'll be distracted from the yellow fever because you will be having basically the most annoying day in history.

**Sydnee:** He actually later realized that that didn't work, to be fair.

**Justin:** Okay. Hey, to his credit.

**Sydnee:** He advocated a lot of mercury use. To take it as a diuretic and take it to make you throw up. There was another cathartic, something that would make you puke, a jalap, J-A-L-A-P, jalap.

So, you could use that. He advocated that.

**Justin:** Is that worse than, like, ipecac and stuff like that? Because we use stuff like that.

**Sydnee:** It's a similar idea, but we don't use ipecac really, anymore.

**Justin:** Okay. Really?

**Sydnee:** For the most part, no.

**Justin:** Alright.

**Sydnee:** No, most of the things—

**Justin:** That would explain why I've heard about but never actually seen it in real life. That would explain that.

**Sydnee:** No. The reason being that, first of all, if you've got something caustic or dangerous in your stomach, it may be more dangerous to make it come back up your esophagus.

And secondly, we don't want you to accidentally aspirate it down into your lungs on the way back up.

So don't use ipecac. If you've ingested something, go to a hospital.

**Justin:** Go on, we'll wait.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** You can just pause it. Pause your iPad.

**Sydnee:** Just pause it. We'll get back to Benjamin Rush when you return.

**Justin:** Let's get back to Benjamin Rush. I hope you're feeling better, by the way.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, yeah. We'll send you some flowers later. Send us your address.

**Justin:** And a review on iTunes.

**Sydnee:** He actually, at the end of the yellow fever epidemic, he was accused of killing more people than he had saved, publicly, by a European, Dr. Cobb. And he sued that doctor for libel and won.

**Justin:** Hey. Well, I mean you can't get away with that— being that wrong, unless I guess you can.

**Sydnee:** I think it's pretty awesome that you could sue somebody for libel in the 1790s.

**Justin:** Yeah, who knew they even had paper?

**Sydnee:** You didn't know they had paper?

**Justin:** I knew they had paper, of course, but not... ink? I don't know.

**Sydnee:** You know the gag is just that you don't know about medicine, you don't have to pretend to not know about anything.

**Justin:** Okay. Duly noted. Got it. And it's not a gag, I really don't know anything about medicine. I know about ten medical things, because I let you talk to me about them for a half hour, and we record it. That's it.

**Sydnee:** And then you instantly forget them.

**Justin:** I instantly forget. "Like a tee in the wind."

**Sydnee:** He also outfitted—

**Justin:** Nell, everybody. Nell, the movie Nell. That's my Nell impression.

**Sydnee:** That was your... Okay, are you done quoting Nell, now?

**Justin:** I actually am. Like, even if you wanted me to continue.



**Sydnee:** I don't.

**Justin:** I don't have anything. Little Man Tate? I can do Little Man Tate for you.

**Sydnee:** You know what? I don't want you to continue, so don't worry.

**Justin:** Okay. Go on.

**Sydnee:** He outfitted the Lewis and Clark expedition, medically.

**Justin:** Hey! See, there you go. That's good.

**Sydnee:** You know what he sent them along with?

**Justin:** Uh, medicine?

**Sydnee:** How about some Turkish opium?

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Fantastic.

**Sydnee:** [sarcastic] It's great for nervousness. [laughs]

**Justin:** [laughs] Well, yes.

**Sydnee:** It probably is.

**Justin:** Yes. Correct. Bad for expediting.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] That's why the Lewis and Clark expedition is still going on to this day.

**Justin:** "Do you guys feel like expediting today?"

"Nah."

**Sydnee:** "Nah."

**Justin:** "Me neither! Let's chill."

**Sydnee:** "Over two hundred years."

**Justin:** "Pass me those Cheetos we invented."

**Sydnee:** They also, which went well with this, he also told them to take some medicinal wine, which I guess was wine?

**Justin:** I guess this is why everyone calls it "The Coolest Expedition Ever." No expedition afterwards would live up to this.

**Sydnee:** No wonder Sacagawea hooked up with him.

**Justin:** Yeah. "Hey, woah! You know, I've never been—"

**Sydnee:** "Got some Turkish opium?"

**Justin:** "You know, I've never been big on the white man, but this is alright."

**Sydnee:** Now, on the flip side, he also sent with them his patented mercury pills. It was just a certain... You know, there were a ton... everybody had mercury pills at the time.

But his were known as Thunderclappers.

**Justin:** Uh, Thunderclappers. Go on.

**Sydnee:** Well, they worked really well as laxatives. Hence the name.

**Justin:** Oh man. You know, this expedition is seeming less cool by the minute.

**Sydnee:** You know what was cool, is that he sent... I mean, he sent hundreds of these pills with them, to take. I mean, because if you need one thing for an expedition, it's a laxative.

**Justin:** Right.

**Sydnee:** He sent so many of these, that archaeologists, decades later, were able to use the mercury from the pills to trace the path of their expedition across the country.

**Justin:** Wow. Wow. That is a lot of laxative.

**Sydnee:** Isn't that awesome?

**Justin:** That's fantastic.

**Sydnee:** I think that's pretty cool.

**Justin:** Hey, this guy won't give up—

**Sydnee:** Inadvertently.

**Justin:** This guy won't give up the mercury dream. He must have had stock in mercury, for all the different—

**Sydnee:** He owned a mercury mine somewhere...

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Now, I do think we should visit his work with mental illness, because—

**Justin:** Sure. The one good note, sort of bright spot, in his medical history now, I guess.

**Sydnee:** It certainly was a good thing, the idea that we should... You know, the moral therapy concept that we need to not chain and completely lock up people who are mentally ill. Obviously that was a bad idea.

But, his reasoning for why does mental illness occur, was a little off-base again, as most people's was at the time.

It resulted from, he thought, poor circulation to the brain. Maybe sensory overload. Or maybe bad weather. Or blood transfusions from animals to humans. Or maybe worms.

**Justin:** "I feel a storm coming, my trick brain's actin' up! Look at it swell. Size of a melon. Storm!"

**Sydnee:** Or maybe it's just sympathy between your brain and your hemorrhoids.

**Justin:** Is that you speculating, or is that a Benjamin Rush joint?

**Sydnee:** No, that was a Benjamin Rush joint.

**Justin:** Fantastic.

**Sydnee:** No, that was not me. Did you think that was my guess?

**Justin:** I thought you were taking a shot at the dark. You want to push us forward.

**Sydnee:** I have a degree.

**Justin:** I can see it. It's actually in eyeshot.

**Sydnee:** I keep it there during this show to remind myself.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** He also invented the gyrator.

**Justin:** Now what's that? That sounds like fun.

**Sydnee:** It was for the therapy known as "swinging," whereby—

**Justin:** Alright, yeah!

**Sydnee:** Well, no, no—

**Justin:** Pioneer.

**Sydnee:** ... not the fun kind. You put a patient in a chair that's suspended from a ceiling with a chain. And you just swing them around like a top for hours and hours.

**Justin:** Only on [extremerestraints.com](http://extremerestraints.com)

**Sydnee:** [laughs] The idea is that you can get more blood flow to the brain that way.

**Justin:** And you can?

**Sydnee:** You could also use like a centrifugal spinning board that he created, although it's not clear that he ever actually used it in his hospitals, he did try it out with patients, where he would just strap them to like a giant wheel of fortune and spin them around until their blood rushed to their head.

**Justin:** Only on [extremerestrains.com](http://extremerestrains.com).

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Also, a sensory deprivation chair.

**Justin:** Yeah, that's only on [extremerestraints.com](http://extremerestraints.com).

**Sydnee:** [laughs] Are we done with that joke now?

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** It was like a... He also called it the tranquilizer chair, and you would just strap them to a chair and put a box over their head so they couldn't hear or speak and just leave them there, for days.

That doesn't work.

**Justin:** No, I wouldn't think so.

**Sydnee:** No. these are bad ideas, in case that wasn't clear. We don't do this anymore.

**Justin:** No, okay.

**Sydnee:** And as I said, he advocated letting the mentally ill work around the hospital to get them back into society. Because they're human, so we should treat them that way.

And that inspired a lot of other doctors to do the same thing, so there was this whole time period where doctors were strapping mentally ill patients to plows.

**Justin:** Now, that is not that uncommon in the Wolves of the Calla, the fifth novel in the Gunslinger series.

Young people come back "roont" after the Wolves take them, come back to the Calla and are put to work that way, because they're very strong. I mean, there's a historical basis for that.

**Sydnee:** I don't know what you're talking about.

**Justin:** It's the fifth Gunslinger book.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hm.

**Justin:** It's just... history.

**Sydnee:** Is that your medical reference? Oh, that's history.

**Justin:** It's history.

**Sydnee:** We need to cover what "history" is, at some point.

**Justin:** Uh...

**Sydnee:** We'll do that privately.

**Justin:** Go on. I'm sorry to have interrupted you with my brief detour into the Gunslinger novels.

**Sydnee:** While this isn't actually one of Benjamin Rush's treatment techniques, I do think it's worth noting that his therapies inspired another doctor to pour a watering can of urine on a patient who thought he was a plant.

Not clear how that fixed anything.

**Justin:** Don't think that's a good treatment.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] But he attributed his idea—

**Justin:** I bet he—

**Sydnee:** ... to Benjamin Rush.

**Justin:** I'm not going to give that guy the historical pass that I will extend to so many. You did not... Sir? Sir? Sir? Sir? You did not think that would help. I do not...

You can try to convince me, you can try to tell me "Oh, I'm an old-timey guy, I don't know any..." You knew it would not help! You wanted to pour pee on a human.

**Sydnee:** I'm also... I'm pretty sure he didn't have an actual watering can, so he used a teapot.

**Justin:** Fantastic. You couldn't even commit to the bit!

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** Nightmare.

**Sydnee:** He also, of course, used a lot more mercury and bleeding, for mental illness as well. That was kind of the mainstay of his treatment.

One of the worst ideas, I have to say, is he thought people who suffered, he had observed, were less likely to be suffering from mental illness.

He really thought that mental illness was more something that occurred to the rich and idle.

He actually had a list of risk factors for mental illness, so these are the ones he cited the most frequently: "Children of insane parents."

**Justin:** Okay, that's probably...

**Sydnee:** And that's not totally off the mark. We know now that some mental illnesses have a genetic component.

**Justin:** Is insane an offensive term at this point?

**Sydnee:** We don't use that word.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** No. Mental illness, I mean... No.

**Justin:** I'm sure you're using his vernacular; I was just curious.

**Sydnee:** No, these were his criteria, as written by him.

**Justin:** No.

**Sydnee:** Not as said by me.

There were also, "individuals who were isolated and lonely, such as unmarried persons or women living in frontier settlements."

**Justin:** I mean... Like... His... I'm not a man of science. I think that we have all gathered this.

**Sydnee:** Yes.



**Justin:** His inability... Okay. His inability to grasp the difference between relation and causation.

Like, yeah, I mean, I guess you're right, but maybe people who are severely, severely mentally ill probably don't happen into a lot of super stable relationships. How does he not see this?

**Sydnee:** Yeah. And this is like a hallmark of the time period. Where people would see things occurring together and we had no concept of correlation versus causation versus which came first. Who knows?

He also believed that dark hair was a risk factor for mental illness. I don't know if that can just be extrapolated that more people have dark hair than light hair?

**Justin:** I don't know.

**Sydnee:** He thought-

**Justin:** Maybe they just want to be special. Want to set themselves apart.

**Sydnee:** As we go more general, people between the age of 20 and 50.

**Justin:** [scoffs] Good job.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. So, not everybody necessarily. But again, also, the rich and idle who basically had, as he put it, "the leisure to look back upon the past and to anticipate the future and imaginary evils."

So if you had time to have a mental illness, then you got one, essentially.

**Justin:** "What? A panic attack? No, no no. Tuesday? That's no—"

**Sydnee:** "I'm much too busy for that."

**Justin:** "No good for me."

**Sydnee:** As a result, he felt suffering could cure mental illness. And so in the most extreme cases, some have written that he would cut patients and pour acid in their wounds.

**Justin:** Ugh.

**Sydnee:** Then he would, and this was actually a common medical practice at the time, to keep a wound open, keep irritating it, it was called counter-irritation, to prevent it from healing for years, because it was thought that that would somehow reduce inflammation elsewhere.

That's not true, but it was practiced beyond just Benjamin Rush. He believed a simulated near-drowning was good for a patient. And he also observed that in India they would tame elephants through starvation. So he thought, you know, why not try to tame people the same way?

**Justin:** Can I say, I know we delve into a lot of really gross medical practices. I could listen to a thousand "Rip your toenails off to cure your migraine," that does not get to me that much.

But the way, and I know I've mentioned it before, but like the way we've treated mentally ill people in this country over the past ever—

**Sydnee:** In every country.

**Justin:** In this country, in every country, I mean, it's despicable. And I know that it's a really complex problem, and we just weren't— It wasn't as easy to crack as a broken arm.

**Sydnee:** And he was... Part of the reason that, to this day, and I haven't looked at the seal in a while, but I believe that if you look at the seal for the American Psychiatric Association, Benjamin Rush is still on it, is because he was one of the first people to say, "You know, mental illness is an illness" and not the result of demons or possession.

So that was a step in the right direction, to be fair, to his credit.

**Justin:** Alright.

**Sydnee:** And I guess, the last thing, as long as we're being completely honest, you know, he did believe that addiction was a disease and he was a big advocate for treating alcoholism as a disease.

But mainly, he was ardently anti-alcohol. He was anti-sex. He advocated against masturbation. Prostitution was actually pretty rampant and accepted practice in the colonies prior to—

You know, after the Revolution and the Enlightenment, there was a kind of a new movement for purity and morality and to escape our Evil European Values. And so he was a big part of that movement.

Which, as a result, it didn't do anything to help the quote-unquote "fallen women," who would be stuffed into asylums basically by the dozens, because that was the only way that they could get their venereal diseases treated.

Resulting in a lot of women never seeking treatment, because the only way you could get it is if you admitted that you'd had sex, and then you were put in the exact kind of institution that Benjamin Rush wasn't a fan of. So... full disclosure.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] But other than that... Totally cool.

**Sydnee:** [sarcastic] Total hero of medicine.

**Justin:** [sarcastic] Total hero of medicine. Thank you so much for listening. We're really sorry about Benjamin Rush and all of his missteps—

**Sydnee:** We're going to get some flack on this one, I think.

**Justin:** Why is that?

**Sydnee:** I'm sure there are some Benjamin Rush fans out there.

**Justin:** I mean, you gotta take your heroes as they are, you know? Don't make idols out of anybody. That's what the La Biblay says.

**Sydnee:** Exactly. They are only as good as their time and the science of the time and their understanding and their social situation and-

**Justin:** And how racist they are.

**Sydnee:** [laughs] How racist they are.

**Justin:** Are they super-racist? That might be a problem for them.

**Sydnee:** Why do they all hate women so much?

**Justin and Sydnee:** That's a great question.

**Justin:** I don't know.

Thank you so much for listening to *Sawbones*. We hope you had a lot of fun. Want to thank the people that gave us a review on iTunes this week, like RedmondKC, Spewbag, lumpyspacegirl, Criscokid, Malin, MARINEEXTREEM, LQTech, Darin 505, stockholmux, Tatoinedweller, cornbread guy.

Boy people are just... ploplasthatjustwontstop, that's fantastic.

kstovershields [spelling not confirmed], ANN61, kenjamin franklin, Mountain Thunder, SoapBox Hero81, Little\_No, so many others.

Thank you. And Cobble75, who proves you don't have to be eloquent or long-winded in your review. Cobble75 says, "I like this. You will like it as well. It is interesting and funny." I like that.

**Sydnee:** Thank you Cobble75.

**Justin:** To the point.

So, if you wouldn't mind hopping over to iTunes to give us a review, that really helps us out a lot. And maybe share this show with a friend.

So many of you have been great about tweeting with the @sawbones username and sharing the show with people.

Like Bethany, Trish, Beth, Nick, Zach, Glennis, Lizzy, Elema, Mitch, Allen. Thank you so much for doing that and please share the show with folks. That's the only way we grow. We don't advertise...

**Sydnee:** You can also tweet at us, @justinmcelroy.

**Justin:** And she's @sydneemcelroy, S-Y-D-N-E-E.

And we want to encourage you to listen to all the other great shows on the Maximum Fun network, like *Judge John Hodgman*, *Stop Podcasting Yourself*, *Jordan*, *Jesse, Go!*, *Bullseye*, *One Bad Mother*, *Wham Bam Pow*.

**Sydnee:** *My Brother, My Brother and Me*.

**Justin:** Ah, thank you Sydnee.

**Sydnee:** You're welcome.

**Justin:** And make sure to join us again next Friday for *Sawbones*. I'm Justin McElroy.

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

**Justin:** And as always, don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme song plays]

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