

## Sawbones 378: Vicks

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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:** And I'm so excited, and nervous, and a little bit excited, yes, ex-kited and scared. [singing] Isn't it nice to know a lot? And a little bit not. [normally] That's right, I did the research for this week's *Sawbones*, to give Sydnee... *Into the Woods*?

**Sydnee:** Ohh, *Into the Woods*! Sorry.

**Justin:** It's alright. It wasn't a very good rendition.

**Sydnee:** No, no, I—I'm with you now. It just took me a minute to follow where you were...

**Justin:** Sydnee was real busy saving the world this week, and she said, "J-man. In my hour of need, can you please come through for me and help me to—and research an episode? Please, I'm begging. I'm on my hands and knees begging."

**Sydnee:** And Justin was like, "But I don't know anything about medicine. There's only one thing that I love more than anything else. More than you, my wife."

**Justin:** That's not true, I didn't say that.

**Sydnee:** "And that's... brands."

**Justin:** Boy, do I love brands. And, uh, love—love interacting with 'em on social media. I love the different products and everything. And I thought, "You know what?"

**Sydnee:** They have Arby's-themed swim trunks for sale now, if you... like those.

**Justin:** Who are you telling?

**Sydnee:** I'm—the audience.

**Justin:** Oh. How do you know that?

**Sydnee:** 'Cause you own them.

**Justin:** Okay, there we go. Alright, good. I was hoping you weren't telling me, 'cause you've seen me in the Arby's trunks and I can't imagine that's an image that's easily wiped away by time.

**Sydnee:** I only know about the Arby's trunks because you own them. I thought that I would tell everyone and you would then, like, jump in and be like, "I already have a pair! And they're the... meatiest." I don't know. Ew!

**Justin:** Ooh, they're real meaty.

**Sydnee:** Ew! Ew! Ah!

**Justin:** No, I wanted to celebrate brands! We're always talking about medicine and achievements and illness. And in my head I'm like—

**Sydnee:** Science.

**Justin:** —"But where are the brands?"

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** So I wanted to do—it was originally gonna be an episode where I celebrated a bunch of different brands, because we've been watching this show called, um, *Food That Build America*, and it's this amazing, like, super gravitas... mixed with, like, "And this is how he made Lays potato chips. You'll never believe the story behind Campbell's Soup."

**Sydnee:** Everybody's—it always vacillates between a very frustrated young businessperson who's trying to make it, and then the same businessperson celebrating by drinking a glass of whiskey in their office, and then being frustrated again, and then celebrating with more whiskey.

**Justin:** Yeah. There's reenactments. So, like—[laughs] there's reenactments. So, like, as time passes and they get wealthier and wealthier, and their business becomes more and more successful, they don't ever change offices. They just, like, shoot it from, like—

**Sydnee:** Or clothes. They don't change outfits.

**Justin:** —sometimes they'll get a big fake mustache, like "I'm an older man now, and I'm still making Campbell's Soup!"

**Sydnee:** "Out of this office, in this suit. With the same—"

**Justin:** The same outfit.

**Sydnee:** "—glass of whiskey... " that—that's always a big feature. I never get to drink whiskey in my office.

**Justin:** Yeah. And well, that—that has something to do with your... career path.

**Sydnee:** My line of work. Sure, sure.

**Justin:** So I was gonna do an all, um... where it was like a complete retrospective on brands. And then the first brand that I thought of, I just kept finding more stuff that I was like, "That's pretty interesting."

I do not have—this is not gonna be like a typical *Sawbones* where we're having, like, an arc as much, like a historical arc. We will be vaguely chronological.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** Fair? But we're, uh—but it's gonna be more of a survey.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Just an exploration.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** Sydnee, today we're going to be talking about Vicks.

**Sydnee:** Oh, okay! I know Vicks.

**Justin:** Yeah, you—you think you—you just *think* you know Vicks.

**Sydnee:** Uh, the Vicks product I'm most familiar with is VapoRub.

**Justin:** Okay, good.

**Sydnee:** Because when I was little and I would have a cold, my mom would put Vicks VapoRub on a handkerchief, like a cloth handkerchief, and have me, like, hold it and breathe it in.

**Justin:** Like a, um—like an old-timey kidnapper with chloroform on their hankie.

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** Right? That same principle?

**Sydnee:** Well, but she wouldn't, like, put it over my face. Like, she would just hand it to me.

**Justin:** "Breathe in. Breathe in, sweetie."

**Sydnee:** And I would, like, cuddle up—

**Justin:** "Don't fight it."

**Sydnee:** —on the couch with my box chicken noodle soup and my Archie comics and... huff—

**Justin:** [simultaneously] Huff.

**Sydnee:** —my [through laughter] Vicks VapoRub.

**Justin:** [crosstalk] The stor—

**Sydnee:** [through laughter] Handkerchief.

**Justin:** —we are going to be talking about Vicks VapoRub a *lot*. Um, the story of Vicks starts with Lunsford Richardson. He was born in 1854 on a farm, uh, in North Carolina. He went to a college called Davidson College, graduated with honors. Uh, he married Mary Lynn Smith. They had kids, H. Smith Richardson and a second son, Lunsford Richardson, Lunny Jr. They also had—

**Sydnee:** Just a regular life so far.

**Justin:** Regleeur life. Also had three daughters. Laurinda, uh, Mary N., and Janet L., according to Wikipedia.

**Sydnee:** Now, do I have to memorize all these names? You've given me a lot of children's names.

**Justin:** There will be a—there will be a quiz.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** No, we're getting his, like...

**Sydnee:** I'm only gonna remember Laurinda.

**Justin:** This is not—you have to remember, this is not a tortured character. I don't even know that his life is particularly that interesting, but he is at the heart of Vicks, so we're gonna talk about Lunsford Richardson.

So... he's working in Greensboro. He's working on different, like, home remedies and what-have-you. Um, and one of the products that he comes up with is... well, VapoRub. Not called that at this time. He sells a lot of different things. Um, and he's looking for an umbrella to put it under, right? And he stumbles upon Vicks.

So his last name, Richardson, would not fit well on the label of the products, right? But Vicks would. Vicks is the last name of his brother in law, who was a family physician who, according to some accounts, help to give him some startup money, but also, like, was naming it maybe just, like, "If you know about Vicks, this physician, this is—the—"

**Sydnee:** Ohh.

**Justin:** "—Vicks home remedies." There was also a very popular product called Vicks seeds at the time, and he was sort, like, building on that idea. But mainly, like, his name wouldn't fit on the label. And I think it continued to get to him that it wasn't, you know, under his name. But Vicks was short, and it was punchy, and pretty soon there were 21 different Vicks Family Remedies, as they were called.

So he comes up with—there's two different versions of the VapoRub story, okay? There's the one that the Vicks company tells you, and then there's another one. [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** So, uh, here is what the Vicks website will tell you about the creation of VapoRub.

Vicks says, "The product was created by Lunsford Richardson out of love and concern for his sick son. Young Smith Richardson had a severe case of croup."

**Sydnee:** Hmm.

**Justin:** Which is what, Syd? What's that? What's croup?

**Sydnee:** Uh, croup is a viral illness that kids get. It's caused by a virus that's a para-influenza. Next to...

**Justin:** Next to... influenza-adjacent.

**Sydnee:** ... influenza. This is a different virus. It's a viral illness. It's usually self-limited, but sometimes you need some medications or some respiratory support to get through it. Kids still get it today.

**Justin:** So this is—uh, so they say that he had croup, and Lunsford Richardson combined unique ingredients into a salve that, when heated by the body, would release soothing vapors.

And then it says on the website, "The boy soon recovered." [wheezes]  
[unintelligible] Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** Yeah. It probably wasn't the—

**Sydnee:** The boy probably would've recovered anyway.

**Justin:** Probably. Now, there is a different version of this, uh, from a McGill University professor named Joe Schwartz, who claims that the product can be traced to Jules Bengue, a French pharmacist who created...

**Sydnee:** Ben-Gay, I'm guessing.

**Justin:** Ben-Gay, exactly! But his last name, B-E-N-G-U-E—if you're wondering why it's called Ben-Gay it's 'cause his last name was Jules Bengue. [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** Huh!

**Justin:** That's the name of the guy that created it.

**Sydnee:** Is that how you s... that's not how you spell Ben-Gay, though, the product, right?

**Justin:** B-E-N-hyphen-G-A-Y.

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** They wanted to make it, like, uber phonetic for the dumb-dumb Americans, I'm assuming.

**Sydnee:** Well, that's because I think the—I think the average American speaking English would—B-E-N-G-U-E say Bing-you.

**Justin:** So—

**Sydnee:** Which is wrong.

**Justin:** This is a menthol-based product, not unlike VapoRub, but it was sold as a treatment for arthritis and gout, and [hesitantly] neural... neuralgia?

**Sydnee:** Neuralgia.

**Justin:** Neuralgia.

**Sydnee:** Like nerve pain.

**Justin:** Okay.

**Sydnee:** Algia, it hurts.

**Justin:** According to Joe Schwartz's, uh, accounting of this, Lunsford saw—heard from—he sold Ben-Gay in his pharmacy, and he heard from his customers that it cleared their sinuses. Which is not its intended purpose, but because of the menthol in it, he heard from them, like, "Oh, this worked to clear my sinuses."

So he basically, like, a version of Ben-Gay but using that as, like, the...

**Sydnee:** Ohh.

**Justin:** ... the—the idea behind it. And you know, who knows? Maybe it was... a little of column A, a little of column B.

**Sydnee:** Sure.

**Justin:** you know, obviously the Vicks website doesn't mention Ben-Gay as, like, the—the spiritual inspiration for this product. But—

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** —that is—that is one accounting of it.

**Sydnee:** But they would never—you would never do that, though, with a lot of these products. Because they're being sold not on the strength of their, um... like, the quality of the product, necessarily, as much as the recognition and connotation, so you wouldn't wanna build on another competitor, you know?

**Justin:** He called this product Vicks croup and pneumonia salve, but you know it today obviously as VapoRub. Mainly marketed towards croupy babies. Uh, and it had menthol, which was a kind of new drug that was coming from Japan, and it was incorporated into a balm with some other ingredients, like camphor and things like that.

**Sydnee:** Sure.



**Justin:** And, uh, since it was only—it was popular in part because it was used externally, so there wasn't, um, stomach upset. It wasn't creating stomach problems for people, so they liked that. That was apparently one of the selling points of it, is that it wasn't bothering your tummy like a lot of these other treatments would.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. Well, that makes a lot of sense if you consider that a lot of the remedies, so to speak, of the day, as we've talked about on the show—the way you would believe that they did anything is by making sure they did something. And so a lot of 'em would, you know, make you feel really sick, or [holding back laughter] give you diarrhea, or whatever. And then you knew, like, it's working.

**Justin:** So in 1898, he sold the drugstore, and he started a wholesale drug company, at which he eventually sold that part to found Vicks Family Remedies Company. He wanted to just focus on that. Um, initially they struggled to sell outside the Greensboro area. Eventually the business changed hands to Lunsford's son, who decided to just concentrate on Vicks croup and pneumonia salve.

Uh, but he renamed it, the son who theoretically the product was initially invented for, renamed it to VapoRub. Um, and focused on that. That's what he decided to focus the business on.

**Sydnee:** How did he—like, when I think of, like, vapo—vaporizer...

**Justin:** Vapor? Vapo—the vapors that the rub creates.

**Sydnee:** Hmm.

**Justin:** You got vapo, you got rub. It's VapoRub.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** Um, so that—and the name was his idea. He came up with the name. Uh, the product was still sort of struggling to get, like, the sort of, like, major success story that he wanted it to be, until in one year its sales more than tripled to 2.9 million dollars in sales. Can you guess what year that was, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:** What—what year are we in?

**Justin:** If I told you a year we were in—

**Sydnee:** No, I mean what time period are we in?

**Justin:** I mean, the—

**Sydnee:** Like, when did he first—when was this?

**Justin:** He took over... this would've been, like—he took over—the last year touched on we had was 1905. He took over in 1905. Er, sorry, shortly after that.

**Sydnee:** 1918, 1919?

**Justin:** Exactly!

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** During the, uh—the—

**Sydnee:** The influenza pandemic.

**Justin:** Exactly. It was a huge boon to that product, and it is really what set it on fire. It was ubiquitous. Um, and they built on the success of VapoRub.

**Sydnee:** It's a shame, 'cause it probably did nothing for... influenza.

**Justin:** Well, yeah. But, I mean, why let that get in the way of a good brand story, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:** [laughs]

**Justin:** You're not here to be a bummer! You fill the Justin role. You just make fun jokes.

**Sydnee:** I'm just saying! Like—

**Justin:** But not at the expense of brands!

**Sydnee:** A lot of people bought it, but it wouldn't have helped them.

**Justin:** Um, so we—[stammering]—to continue to follow the sort of Vicks story, they continued to introduce new products after this. In '31, they sold cough drops

that were in the—if you've ever seen the classic Vicks logo where it's like the inverted triangle that's greenish?

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** With the little point down at the end.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** That's the shape of the cough drops that they brought out.

**Sydnee:** Triangular, huh?

**Justin:** Yeah, right? And you wouldn't think of it as the most aerodynam—[wheeze-laughs]—throat-o-dynamic.

**Sydnee:** Well, it doesn't sound like it'd be pleasant in your mouth, even.

**Justin:** Yeah. In—

**Sydnee:** Kind of all angles.

**Justin:** No, you wouldn't think. In 1952, cough syrup was added to the mix. 1959, they came out with Sinex nasal spray, uh, and in 1966, NyQuil hit the market. We're gonna zoom back in on some of those products.

**Sydnee:** NyQuil!

**Justin:** Mm-hmm! Uh, so in 1930's, they merged with the William S. Merrell chemical company to form Richardson-Merrell, and that was the name of the company for quite some time. Richardson-Merrell. Obviously not using the Vicks thing. Just focusing on, you know, these—the—he wanted to get his last name in there at least, in the business name.

**Sydnee:** Right, somewhere.

**Justin:** Um, Vicks kind of became syno—because of these products, kind of became synonymous with colds. Cold and flu stuff. And they even, in the 1940's, started marketing the Vicks Plan to fight colds, right?

**Sydnee:** [quietly] Oh no.

**Justin:** So this was a—a strategy that they cooked up for how they could fight colds, and I'll read this to you. This is, uh...

"From their vast experience, Vicks medical advisers and scientists developed a simple home guide called Vicks Plan that proved its real worth in tests made among 2,650 children under medical supervision. Reports show that it resulted in fewer colds, shorter colds, 50% less sickness from colds. Now this tested Vicks Plan is ready for you to use in dealing with colds. Of course, Vicks plan may do less for you and your family, or it may do... "

**Sydnee:** More.

**Justin:** "More!" [wheeze-laughs]

**Sydnee:** Wait—okay.

**Justin:** "At a time like this, it is certainly worth trying in your own home."  
[laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** 250,000 kids?

**Justin:** 2,650 kids.

**Sydnee:** Ohh, I thought you said 250 thou—so—

**Justin:** That'd be a heck of a study.

**Sydnee:** Yeah—well, that's what I was gonna say. How did they get that? So 2,650 children.

**Justin:** Yep.

**Sydnee:** They tested this plan. Do you have the plan? What is the plan?

**Justin:** I got the plan! It's a three-step plan.

**Sydnee:** Do you have the—did you read the study? Did they publish the study?

**Justin:** No, this is a newspaper ad I'm reading, so no, they didn't have the—"Just trust us, there's a study," is—is implied.

**Sydnee:** That's what I'm wondering. I'm wondering, like, where is the study?

**Justin:** Yeah. Well... I don't have the study in front of me.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** Okay. So...

**Sydnee:** Maybe there wasn't one.

**Justin:** Here's the plan. One: observe a few simple health rules. Live normally. Avoid excesses.

**Sydnee:** [through laughter] Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait.

**Justin:** Live normally! Don't—

**Sydnee:** Hold on! Back up!

**Justin:** —don't be weird!

**Sydnee:** "Live normally"?!"

**Justin:** The first one is, "Don't be weird!" [wheeze-laugh] "Don't do weird stuff, 'cause we can't account for that."

**Sydnee:** "Live normally?!"

**Justin:** Live normally.

**Sydnee:** What does *that* mean?

**Justin:** "Live normally. Avoid excesses. Drink plenty of water. Keep elimination regular."

That's huge if you wanna avoid colds.

**Sydnee:** Keep elimination regular.

**Justin:** "Keep elimination regular." As if I have a choice in that ma—like, just like—like I'm deciding? Come on.

**Sydnee:** Well, you know, there are nutritional things you can do to stay regular.

**Justin:** "Get needed rest and sleep. Avoid crowds and people who have colds."

Hey, gotta—shoutout to the—[wheezes] that's a good one, right?

**Sydnee:** Okay, that one's a good—that's a good one. That's actually a good one.

**Justin:** "Avoid people who have colds," right?

**Sydnee:** Yeah!

**Justin:** "When a cold threatens, at the first warning sign, first sniffle or sneeze, use Vicks Vatronol as directed."

**Sydnee:** Vatronol.

**Justin:** Yes, Vatronol.

**Sydnee:** What was that?

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

**Sydnee:** Which of the products?

**Justin:** I'll tell you about Vicks Vatronol, Syd. Just slip those headphones on.

[clip of old advertisement plays]

[big band music plays in the background]

**Radio Announcer:** Jackson, Mississippi, and the beautiful residential district hasn't suffered one bit from the California and Arizona snows most sections of the country have been getting.

Even so, with all the changing temperatures, Mrs. Brown is troubled with a sniffly, sneezy head cold. But fortunately, she knows that today, head cold stuffiness can

be relieved in seconds with Vicks Vatronol nose drops. They work fast to bring soothing relief.

Meanwhile, downtown at his office, Mr. Brown knows it's good business to keep a bottle of Vicks Vatronol nose drops handy.

A few drops soothe irritation, help to clear out congestion, bring relief in seconds. Try Vicks Vatronol yourself!

[clip ends]

**Justin:** So as near as I can tell, Syd, mainly, like, uh—looks like...

**Sydnee:** N—nose... drops?

**Justin:** They're nose drops. Looks like similar—from what I was able to find, similar ingredients to what was in VapoRub. Just sort of, like, intense... I believe, like, menthol and camphor, but you would take drops of it and just blast it right in there, your nose holes, there.

**Sydnee:** I'm trying to find the ingredients in it.

**Justin:** From what I could find here, menthol and camphor were the...

**Sydnee:** Those were the ingredients?

**Justin:** Yes.

**Sydnee:** Okay. Probably wouldn't kill you.

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** I don't know. That's true for a lot of these. When it comes to—I mean, I don't wanna knock on Vicks too hard, 'cause when it comes to some of these, like, over-the-counter cold, sinus, whatever remedies...

**Justin:** Mm-hmm?

**Sydnee:** Even today, a lot of 'em it's like, "Well... they probably won't kill you."  
[laughs]

**Justin:** We're gonna get into more of that, and I love your judgment. If you could reserve it just a little bit till I finish my story about brands.

Uh, so, Vatronol. Step two, when a cold threatens. But if you still get a cold, even—even after you jam Vatronol up your nose—

**Sydnee:** Menthol and camphor up your nose.

**Justin:** Yeah. Uh, use Vicks VapoRub at bedtime. Its double action starts to work at once, and keeps on working for hours, and invites restful sleep.

**Sydnee:** The first thing won't prevent a cold, and this will not cure a cold, but carry on.

**Justin:** Then at the bottom it says, "Full details of Vicks Plan in your package of Vicks. If the miserable symptoms of a cold are not relieved promptly, or if more serious trouble seems to threaten, call your family doctor right away."

A reasonable plan, I feel like! A reasonable plan.

**Sydnee:** You know what's hard—you know what's hard about that plan? It is—it is reasonable to say—if you have, like, your traditional—and... I'm gonna be very cautious how I couch this, 'cause we are living in COVID times, so everything—none of this applies currently. Everything's uncharted. But generally, in the past, if somebody said "I woke up this morning and I had a runny nose, and a little bit of a cough, and some congestion," and it sounded like a cold, I wouldn't advise them to rush immediately to their doctor or call their doctor right away, right?

**Justin:** Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:** Like, a lot of times for mild cold-like symptoms, you don't need to rush anywhere.

**Justin:** Yeah, but if you—

**Sydnee:** Now, I don't know that if you use these over-the-counter things—I don't know that it's necessary. I think you could or you couldn't and it wouldn't really matter that much. But I do think, like, the idea that you don't need to, for what seems like a mild cold, under pre-pandemic conditions, run to the doctor. I think that that is sound advice.



**Justin:** Yes, but the problem is, if Vicks also has to do a little... covering of their proverbial butts, legally speaking. Like, "Listen... "

**Sydnee:** Well, yeah.

**Justin:** "Go—just go to your doctor, okay? We don't know what we're talking about. I'm sorry. Just kidding! Just buy the VapoRub please."

**Sydnee:** Just buy the VapoRub and then go to your—go to your doctor and get the VapoRub there! 'Cause back then I bet you could've.

**Justin:** I'm gonna tell you more fascinating facts about Vicks, but first I need you to take a break with me, and follow me... to the billing department.

**Sydnee:** Let's go!

[ad break]

**Justin:** So, uh, some more quick hit stuff about this company, which at this point, where we are currently, is Richardson-Merrell. Um, they, uhh... made a push for a drug called Kevadon?

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Um, that I believe you talked about, you are going to be delving into this aspect of this, uh, story in a later episode.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** So we're not gonna dwell on it too much.

**Sydnee:** Do you want me to just name what that is?

**Justin:** It's thalidomide.

**Sydnee:** It's thalidomide.

**Justin:** It's thalidomide.

**Sydnee:** We've gotten lots of requests to do an episode on that, so yes.

**Justin:** So we'll be revisiting that.

**Sydnee:** That's a whole episode worth of material.

**Justin:** Vicks Formula 44. That is—I feel like you never see that one as much anymore. It's still for sale, but...

**Sydnee:** I remember it. Like, I know... yeah.

**Justin:** I don't see—it's a—it's dextromethorphan. Over-the-counter dextromethorphan.

**Sydnee:** There you go.

**Justin:** Um, and then there is in, like we said, the mid-60's, we have NyQuil. Now, NyQuil was interesting, and what sort of set it apart at the time it was released? You know NyQuil as the sniffly, sneezy... you know, so you can rest medicine. That one.

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** They—they change the combination of different things.

**Sydnee:** It's the sleepytime formula.

**Justin:** It's the sleepytime formula. In fact, uh—why is it called NyQuil, you ask? No one knows! [laughs quietly] Not for—

**Sydnee:** Well, I thought—

**Justin:** Well, hold on. I know what you're about to say.

**Sydnee:** Because—

**Justin:** This is what it says on the Vicks website.

"The origin of NyQuil's name is shrouded in legend. Many believe that the name was—"

**Sydnee:** [incredulously] Legend?

**Justin:** "—many—" this is from the company's official website. "Many believe the name was derived from nighttime tranquility, because it delivers superior nighttime relief, and provides the healing power of sleep."

**Sydnee:** Well, I assumed the "Ny" referenced night, because of DayQuil. NyQuil.

**Justin:** Yeah, but DayQuil came decades later, so.

**Sydnee:** Ohh.

**Justin:** Yeah. NyQuil will help you get your Z's. I think what they're saying is "We don't know why it's called NyQuil, but this seems like a good rea—[wheezes]—good a reason as any!"

**Sydnee:** Well, I think the "Quil" part, to my thinking—and, I mean, I don't know. This was just my guess. From a marketing perspective, "Quil," maybe it makes you think of tranquil, or tranquility.

**Justin:** Yeah, nighttime tranquility.

**Sydnee:** Or maybe it makes you just think of tranquilizer.

**Justin:** Yeah, maybe.

**Sydnee:** Like, "I want something to knock me out 'cause I'm so tired of coughing." Is kind of the conno—

**Justin:** Yeah, please.

**Sydnee:** I mean—well, and that's how we think of NyQuil, right? Like, it's the thing that you take when you just need to... [laughs quietly] to be asleep and done with this cold for a while.

**Justin:** The evo—the thing about NyQuil that makes it, like, sort of a—it helps it make a splash. We had cough syrup.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** We had cold pills. Cold medication. NyQuil was the first one that said, like, let's do it all in this syrup.

**Sydnee:** Right.

**Justin:** And it's not just for coughs. It's for... the entire constellation of symptoms. It also was the first to include a dosing cup.

**Sydnee:** Hmm!

**Justin:** So you could—which was a big deal, because it made dosing at home—like, normally if you had a constellation of symptoms you would have to go to your doctor and say, like, "I have this, and this, and this," and here are the three different medicines that you would need for that, or try to mix 'em yourself, you know, figure it out at home.

But this made, like—you didn't have to do that math. You didn't have to figure out all the different doses. It was all in this one dosing cup that was—that came with the bottle.

**Sydnee:** That—you know, that makes sense too, when I think about, like, how often as a kid when I got medicine it was just measured in, like, a spoon. "This is about a teaspoon." And, I mean, it is a teaspoon, but it's sort of a tea—I mean, it's sorta—you know, it's not as exact, certainly, as a measuring cup.

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** Um, in mLs. But the other thing about that, um, it's an alcohol.

**Justin:** What?

**Sydnee:** There is alcohol in there.

**Justin:** Yes, yes. You gotta acetaminophen, dextromethorphan, um... [sounding it out] doxylamine... su—

**Sydnee:** Doxylamine.

**Justin:** Doxylamine succinate?

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm, succinate.

**Justin:** Which, uh—citric acid, alcohol, some thickeners, flavor, high fructose corn syrup.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Some sourness. Um...

**Sydnee:** Not a lot of alcohol, I don't think.

**Justin:** No. There used to—I—I—I'm not sure about this. I think there used to be a little bit more.

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** Um, and of course, alcohol, extremely common ingredient in, like, all medicines at this point.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, especially anything that was gonna be a liquid was usually, you know, put in alcohol, or suspended in alcohol.

**Justin:** Well, they say that the alcohol is to act as a solvent.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** That is what they—

**Sydnee:** That's what I'm saying.

**Justin:** That's what they say.

**Sydnee:** Yeah.

**Justin:** And not just, like... [clicks tongue] you know.

**Sydnee:** Yes. But, I mean... that was always the connotation I had with NyQuil, was, like, that's the stuff you drink when you need to sleep. [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** So following the Vicks story a little bit more, the business evolved into Richardson-Vicks, eventually. Uh, and that company, Richardson-Vicks, was acquired by Procter and Gamble in 1985.

**Sydnee:** Huh.

**Justin:** So there's not a Vicks company anymore, as we know it. It is more of a...

**Sydnee:** Line of products.

**Justin:** Yeah. It's more of a line of products. Now, does, in your opinion—and I have some facts, but they're very... eh, Vicks VapoRub. Does it work, is the question.

**Sydnee:** [sighs] Um, I have looked into this briefly before, because we've—we've talked around Vicks VapoRub. We've never done this sort of history about it, but we have talked around it. And my impression is that there are some studies that indicate that, like, menthol and camphor and those ingredients can make you feel like you have the sensation that you're less congested, can give you that sort of, like, symptomatic relief, but they're not necessarily altering the course of the illness in any way. So there's, like, some subjective improvement.

**Justin:** Okay, that makes sense.

**Sydnee:** That is my impression, from what I've read.

**Justin:** And that—that's basically what, uh—there was a study that Penn State did that showed that it's more effective than placebo petroleum rub for helping cough and congestion, and helping people sleep. But the study also showed that unlike the petroleum rub placebo, Vicks VapoRub was associated with burning sensations to the skin, nose, and eyes. So—and 5% of the people who were in the study had a rash as a result of using the product, so.

**Sydnee:** Really?

**Justin:** Yeah. And the study's, first of all, there is—was a, uh—according to this Wikipedia article was a—a paid consultant for Procter and Gamble.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. That—I mean, I think it's that—when you inhale that scent, you feel like you're breathing better.

**Justin:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah, that is a—you do get the—the sensation, uh, of improved—it *feels like*.

**Sydnee:** It feels like. Now, I don't think that translates to "You are breathing better." That would be what I would argue. But, like, certainly subjective—now, I am surprised that that many people got a rash.

**Justin:** Um, yeah.

**Sydnee:** In that study. That seems like a really large percentage, considering that Vicks VapoRub is used—or at least it used to be. I don't know if it's as common now. I feel like that there was that moment where a lot of parents used these sorts of things for their kids, before a lot more regulation came in. You know? Like, we used to—I mean, the—the days of Dimetapp, and things like that.

You know, when our parents would give us all these medicines that then the, you know, governing organizations came in and said, "Actually, don't. No, never mind. Don't give all this stuff to kids. It's not really helpful and it might—it probably won't harm 'em, but it might, and it doesn't help."

**Justin:** Uh, to have a more complete list to circle back on, um, uh... uh, VapoRub itself, because that is sort of the... the core of the line. Um, we talked about ingredients. Camphor, eucalyptus oil, menthol. And then they have inactive ingredients including cedarleaf oil, nutmeg oil, petrolatum, thymol, and turpentine oil.

This is a product, VapoRub specifically, that has a—like, what you just described, that is a story that a lot of people, for generations, have had. VapoRub is important, like, throughout the planet in different ways. Um, it's—in different, like, cultural communities it takes on different, like, aspects. There was an article in the LA Times about, uh—they refer to it as *Vivaporu*.

Like, the—oh, my pronunciation is probably poor. But, like, it's very important in their community, right? It's—in Germany, it is—they are—these products are for sale. They are not called Vicks... because Vicks sounds a lot like *fick*, and if you're wondering what that translates to... it would be like if here we called these products Vucks. [laughs quietly]

**Sydnee:** Ohh.

**Justin:** So in Germany they're called Wick, and it just looks exactly the same. It all looks exactly the same. It's just Wicks. [wheezes] It's not Vicks. It's Wicks.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** Uh, and so that is what they are marketed under in—throughout Germany.

**Sydnee:** Did you find anywhere where they put it on their feet?

**Justin:** Um...

**Sydnee:** I've heard that before. I've had people tell me that they put VapoRub on their feet.

**Justin:** Yes. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**Sydnee:** To relieve, like, cold symptoms, and I found that very fascinating, 'cause that was not... the tradition that I would say locally I am more familiar with is rub it on the chest, or, like I did, put it on a handkerchief and inhale it. That's what I hear most frequently.

**Justin:** Um, it is not—it would obviously not help with the—the—helping the cold symptoms on the feet. Some people use it for, uh, uh—again, none of these treatments are tested. But in the same way that Ben-Gay would work, as a, you know, a topical analgesic. Is that the right thing to say?

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm, you got it.

**Justin:** And then, um, apparently there was some indication that it might help with foot fungus, so that was why people were applying it to the feet as well.

**Sydnee:** Okay. I have heard that—you know what's so interesting is all this stuff gets muddled, and I have had people tell me that during times of illness they will go to—get in bed, put, uh, Vicks VapoRub on their feet, and then put on some warm socks over it to hold it in, and that that's how they'll help. I have heard that. And, you know, it's always like, "Well... [sighs heavily] that's probably not gonna help, but... it's not harmful, I suppose."

**Justin:** I have to tell you my favorite—this is my favorite thing about Vicks, and I've told you some, I know, captivating things about this brand already, but this is my favorite thing. It's big in India.

**Sydnee:** Okay.



**Justin:** Uh, and it had a sort of slow uptick in India. It was brought over there in the, uh—the mid-60's, and the salesmen who brought it over would go to markets and, like, individually, person-by-person, um, pitch it to 'em, and explain to them how it worked. And it caught on there really big. In fact, one of the, uh—in a book called *India Unbound*, the author of that book describes going to someone's house where a woman was boiling Vicks in hot water and then breathing the vapors.

**Sydnee:** Yes.

**Justin:** And that is where the company got the idea to, like—

**Sydnee:** For the vaporizer?

**Justin:** For the vaporizers and stuff like that.

**Sydnee:** Ohh! We used to have one of those.

**Justin:** Yeah, exactly. So it was, like... it was—that's how big it was there. But in the mid-80's it started to struggle, for two reasons. One is, uh, pharmacists—it's a—the system is more complicated there. But basically pharmacists were boycotting Vicks because they wanted a bigger cut of the, uh—of the profits, basically. They're like distributing and not creating them, right?

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** Um, and then also the government became—because it was worried about—it's politically complicated, but basically the government put in an order in the mid-60's that continued for decades that said that they were able to control the price of drugs, because they were worried about, um... Chinese interfering with drug prices. It's complicated. That part's complicated.

But here's the important thing. They were struggling, right? The pharmacists were boycotting Vicks, and also the government was controlling the prices of, uh...

**Sydnee:** Mm-hmm.

**Justin:** ... drugs. To explain the pharmacist thing a little bit, retailers and chemists who sell drugs—I'm reading, here. "Retailers and chemists who sell

drugs manufactured by pharmacists dictate the availability of drugs on the market, and consequently their price."

So basically the people making the drugs were separate from the people selling the drugs, and they wanted more money. Anyway. It's not important.

Here's the important thing. Vicks was... their profits were going way down, and between these two factors, they were not making money on Vicks VapoRub, which is an extremely popular product. They just couldn't—couldn't make headway.

**Sydnee:** Okay.

**Justin:** So, at that point, Vicks of India applied to the government, because of a small exception in their rule about price controls, to encourage small practitioners and people who weren't into allopathic treatments, Ayurvedic treatments were not part of the drug price control. So in India, Vicks filed for VapoRub to be considered...

**Sydnee:** An Ayurvedic treatment?

**Justin:** An Ayurvedic treatment. They went through the different Ayurvedic texts and found parallels...

**Sydnee:** I'm s—yeah, I can see where that would be, uh-huh.

**Justin:** ... between Ayurvedic treatments, which we've talked about before many times on the show. Basically very old, old, old, ancient, like, India treatments that have been passed down and are still practiced, you know, in different parts of the world.

**Sydnee:** It's its own medical system.

**Justin:** It's a different medical system.

**Sydnee:** That's different than allopathic medicine that we practice.

**Justin:** But! Vicks went the government and said, "Oh, VapoRub? It's an Ayurvedic treatment. Look in the books!" [wheezes]

**Sydnee:** Did that—did that work?

**Justin:** "Look at these ancient texts—" absolutely it worked! So now it—they—Vicks—to this day, [through laughter] Vicks VapoRub is registered as an Ayurvedic product in India, because they were able to, like, look at—there's no licenses. They don't have to pay as much taxes on it. The price control isn't a problem anymore. And according to this, Vicks—oh, and they could also sell it everywhere, 'cause it wasn't a drug anymore, so the pharmacist couldn't control the price anywhere.

**Sydnee:** Aw.

**Justin:** Uh, and—and the outlets carrying Vicks tripled, according to this article, to 750,000 different ones. And, uh, it was massive there. India was established as the leading producer of Vicks VapoRub among more than 130 countries, and it is, uh... it is now a [laughs quietly] a hugely popular Ayurvedic treatment.

**Sydnee:** That's wild. There's something very cynical about that I can't say I love, but...

**Justin:** I love—I mean, that's brands, though, Syd.

**Sydnee:** That's brands.

**Justin:** It's important—

**Sydnee:** No, the—you're true, you're right, that is—

**Justin:** Hey, listen, Syd? That's brands.

**Sydnee:** That's not—that's not medicine, that's not science, that's brands.

**Justin:** That's brands for you, folks! And, uh, that is my story with Vicks. Uh, a proud brand that has done [through laughter] some questionable things that we'll talk about at a later date!

**Sydnee:** Well... all brands.

**Justin:** Yeah. Not all—not all brands. [snorts]

**Sydnee:** Not all bra—[laughs]

**Justin:** [laughs]

**Sydnee:** I mean, that's always the problem with the intersection of capitalism and medicine. I mean, there are two different goals. One is to make people healthy and one is to make people money, and...

**Justin:** What I think the thing—the takeaway for me about VapoRub is—and the thing that seems to, like, resonate with people, is when someone feels bad, it is a thing you can do that makes you feel like you're doing something. That's what it should say on the package. "Feel like you're doing something." [laughs]

**Sydnee:** There is so much of medicine that is that. It's hard, though, because I am more from the opinion that the art of good medicine is doing as much nothing as you can.

**Justin:** Hmm.

**Sydnee:** Um, don't tamper [laughs quietly] too much. But, uh, can I just say, I understand that impulse, and I certainly associate the smell of Vicks VapoRub, to this day, with being cared for, and soothed, and loved, and... coddled. You know, because that's—those were the times when it was part of my life. And so that's nice. And, like, scent is a very powerful memory, like, creator and stimulator and all that.

So, I mean, I think that those sort of things—maybe not medicinally are important, but culturally, socially, have some relevance and some importance that you can put on them. Um, you always wish they could—I mean, maybe it's more appropriate to not classify it as, like, a drug, so to speak.

The only thing I would say, though, is when you named the ingredients you named several different oils, like eucalyptus and things. And, um, I think we've mentioned this on the show before. Inhaling some oils can be triggering for things like asthma attacks. Um, so specifically I would be very careful—and this would be true not just for Vicks VapoRub but anything that you're gonna, like, vaporize and inhale, whether it be in a vaporizer machine or, like you said, like, boiling something to inhale the vapors.

Um, that's always something to be careful with if you have a history of any sort of breathing problems. Asthma or COPD or—um, even in rare cases, I think I've read about, like, epilepsy and stuff. So I would just be careful with, like, inhaling strong oils from any source.

**Justin:** There was a stu—it's funny you say that. There was actually an article from *Science Daily* from 2009 I found when I was researching this that said that, um, it was a study [unintelligible] that suggested, um, that Vicks VapoRub might create respiratory distress in infants and small children, because it stimulated mucus production and airway inflammation, which can affects on the breathing of an infant or a toddler.

**Sydnee:** Yeah. There is—we talked about this in essential oils. There is a reason why, like, just smelling something might not necessarily be dangerous, but actually taking the next step of burning it in some way—you know what I mean, not burning it, but vaporizing it, turning it into vapor, right? You know, that step, and then inhaling it in larger volumes, can be dangerous to some people. And so I would approach that with great caution. I don't think if you, like, sniff some Vicks VapoRub that's necessarily dangerous, but inhaling large quantities of it or vaporizing it certainly—

**Justin:** What they suggested here in this study is, first of all, just, like, following the label instructions. Because it says on the label you shouldn't use it for people under the age of two. I think there's a specific baby rub for that purpose.

**Sydnee:** Yeah, probably.

**Justin:** Uh, I think they sell. And then also, um, to not put it directly under the nose. It's not supposed to go, like, on the lip. It's supposed to go on the chest, and you inhale the vapors from the—

**Sydnee:** [amused] So you shouldn't put it on a handkerchief and stick it up under your nose.

**Sydnee:** Probably you should not do that.

**Sydnee:** I would say, generally speaking, if you are concerned about any sort of breathing problems in young children, just don't use this.

**Justin:** Yeah. Yeah, sure.

**Sydnee:** I mean, it's just—[laughs]

**Justin:** If you wanna abandon a brand, that's been for you—for—with you for generations, then go for it. Abandon the brand. See if I care.

**Sydnee:** It's—well, it's hard! It's—like I said, it's so many of these things. And this is true—by the way, it can be frustrating if you're a parent, especially if, like, you were a parent in more recent gen—like, your kids are older and, like, now you're watching them have kids, this is a big shift. There are tons of medicines for kids, over-the-counter type stuff, that we used to give all the time—that we got, Justin, I'm sure, as children—that are probably not dangerous... but also don't help. [laughs quietly]

**Justin:** Yeah.

**Sydnee:** And will be dangerous for just a few. And so the shift has been, "Just don't do it." It's not gonna help. It—it probably won't hurt, but it might hurt somebody, so why—what's the point? Um, and I don't—maybe Vicks VapoRub goes in that category.

**Justin:** Um, thank you so much for listening to our program! Uh, we—we very much appreciate it. Thanks to The Taxpayers for the use of their song, "Medicines," as the intro and outro of our program. Thanks to you for listening and being patient with me. I know this is probably different from our normal thing. It's pretty hard to do Sydnee's job, as I found out.

**Sydnee:** I thought you did a great job.

**Justin:** Thanks, hon, I appreciate that.

**Sydnee:** I was very proud of you.

**Justin:** That's gonna do it for us. Be sure to join us again next time. 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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