

Sawbones 27: Menstruation

Published January 21, 2014

Listen here on themcelroy.family

Intro (Clint McElroy):

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 song plays]

Justin:

Hello everybody and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I am your cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Well, Syd, we're, uh, we're takin' on a serious, serious issue today. Um, today's topic is, uh, an issue, a disease that plagues almost all women. Uh, it's something that they have to struggle with, um, uh, a disease that they have— Are— I— Gosh I hate to use the word cursed, but I feel like that's appropriate, um, and I'm hopeful that through today's episode, uh, on, uh, menstruation, we can all get together and finally...

Sydnee:

Whoa- whoa- whoa- whoa- whoa.

Justin:

... find a cure.

Sydnee:

So, wait—

Justin:

How about it, science 2014?

Sydnee:

Wait, whoa. Okay, hold on.

Justin:

Where's the cure?

Sydnee:

So you know what we're talking about today?

Justin:

Menstruation, the disease of menstruation.

Sydnee:

Wait, no, no, no, no, no. Yes, I mean, yes, we're gonna talk about...

Justin:

Menstruation disorder.

Sydnee:

... menstruation, but you know it's not a disease right? I mean it's not a disease, it's not an illness.

Justin:

I don't understand why we're, um, our scientists are letting our women bleed once a month as if that... If I get injured and I start bleeding, I go to the doctor. Uh, but somehow at some point, uh, the men in this country of science and industry just decided well that's just normal. I guess...

Sydnee:

Well...

Justin:

...women just bleed.

Sydnee:

Okay, no. Okay, first of all...

Justin:

Nice try, guys.

Sydnee:

... first of all, this is ridiculous. First of all, it's not an illness. It's normal and it's natural and it's just part of being a woman. It's normal. Secondly, uh, men definitely have tried to [laughs] stop it, and fix it, and hide it, and have definitely been made uncomfortable by menstruation for a long time. So, yeah, I don't think they're trying to cure it so much as pretend it's not happening.

Justin:

Okay, that's... Well, that's okay.

Sydnee:

But it's not an illness— Who told you it was an illness?

Justin:

I—

Sydnee:

Do you even know what it is?

Justin:

I have a vague understanding. [pause] If someone were to not know, let's say, be completely in the dark on the topic.

Sydnee:

It's, uh, just not somebody who's sitting next to me, necessarily?

Justin:

No, somebody on pod, in podcast.

Sydnee:

Didn't they teach you this in fifth grade?

Justin:

Uh, I actually was in the boys' class.

Sydnee:

I know, but in the girls' class they taught us about boys.

Justin:

Oh, well, okay, this is an uneven deal then, this explains everything. If you guys were getting, uh, a guys' segment, uh, then that actually explains a lot.

Sydnee:

So you didn't get a girls' segment?

Justin:

Uh, not to my memory no.

Sydnee:

I'll give you a brief, I can't believe I'm doing this, I'll give you a brief overview of what a period is.

Justin:

Yeah, yeah.

Sydnee:

Um...

Justin:

Absolutely.

Sydnee:

Uh, if you, if you want a better reference than what I'm about to give you, may I suggest a Disney film?

Justin:

Uh, Bambi?

Sydnee:

I certainly hope they don't cover this in Bambi. I mean it's been a while since I've seen it but, [laughs] if this is in it, that was a very different movie

than I'm remembering. Uh, no, it was called the Story of Menstruation. They used to show it to school kids between 1945 and 1951, um, and, interestingly, it was the first screenplay to use the word vagina.

Justin:

[laughing] I have not seen that particular Disney film. I'm thinking it must be buried in the vault back with Song of the South.

Sydnee:

I don't— I don't know when— When does that one come out of the vault?

Justin:

Yeah, when were you, when were we really—

Sydnee:

When is that one coming back on Blu-Ray?

Justin:

When's that Blu-Ray? Let it out of the vault.

Sydnee:

Interestingly in it, the blood is white.

Justin:

Wow, really?

Sydnee:

Yeah, the blood was... Uh, they thought it would be too upsetting if it looked like blood, so anything that is, you know, menstrual blood is...

Justin:

That's good. That's not gonna...

Sydnee:

... white. [laughs]

Justin:

... that's not gonna scare our teen girls who do get their periods and it's blood. What?

Sydnee:

"Disney said it was white!"

Justin:

"Dis— I'm sick!"

Sydnee:

Okay, so if you don't have time to run out and purchase a copy of, uh, The Menstrual Story...

Justin:

I don't.

Sydnee:

... by Disney, um...

Justin:

I have a podcast.

Sydnee:

In, uh, [laughs] in short, since Justin doesn't know...

Justin:

Come on, now.

Sydnee:

... uh, your period, um, is something that only happens to women, obviously, 'cause Justin doesn't know about it. Although to be fair, you might not even if it did happen to you.

Justin:

Fair, that is fair.

Sydnee:

And it's because, uh, once a month a woman, uh, ovulates, or releases an egg from her ovary, and it goes down into her uterus where it, uh, actually on the way, in the tube, could be fertilized to become a baby.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

That's where babies come from.

Justin:

That's all perfectly sound and reasonable.

Sydnee:

Except that, uh, if you, if it isn't, then instead you, you know, get rid of everything that's inside in your uterus. So you shed the lining, the endometrium, and you get rid of the egg that was unfertilized, and, uh, all of this comes out as a period or a time period, that's where the word comes from, a period of time, where you bleed.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So, it happens about once a month for most women, uh, it lasts five to seven days usually. Um, you usually lose, um- um, about a cup or less of blood, so it's not a very heavy, although it can seem that way, it's usually not much heavier than that, and it can be accompanied by things like cramping and, uh, fatigue, and, uh, some women can feel sad, or moody, or tired, or angry.

Justin:

How long have we been calling it a period? Is that— It seems like something polite society would create, a euphemism from polite society.

Sydnee:

A period came around, like, in 1822, I think was the first time it was actually used in a text. And it was just helpful because they, uh, kind of, like, uh, I

was using it, it is a period of time. So menstrual cycles, historically, were a great way of, kind of, figuring out, uh, spans of time.

They actually... There's some evidence that they were probably used pre-historically to, kind of, follow the lunar calendar or to, like, an early form of math, 'cause it was the only thing that you could reliably...

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

... you know. You didn't have watches or clocks, you didn't have the sense of time, but you knew that there was some interval between this occurrence in a woman's life that for most women was somewhat regular. So, a period of time, it became known as a period.

Justin:

It was actually, uh, pregnancy was met with a lot of chagrin because it always accompanied, uh, the family having to buy a watch, um, so that was unfortunate.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

And a calendar. There's a whole list of expenses. It's not bad enough you gotta get a crib.

Sydnee:

Uh, there's also a word for it that we don't use very often, catamenia, which was, it was popular for a while.

Justin:

Was that a scientific, like, a technical term or?

Sydnee:

Yeah, I think it, I think it was, like, uh, a technical term that arrived that was, um, used at some point, but it's really not persisted. Um, maybe there's some people still using it, it was certainly not something I ever

learned. Um, because if you attempt to find out a lot about catamenia by Googling that word, you won't find out about menstrual cycles, for the most part you're gonna find out about, um, a melodic Nordic metal band called Catamenia.

Justin:

As confusing as that, uh, must have been for you to discover that in your Googling, I'm sure...

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

...the inverse situation is, uh, is equally perplexing.

Sydnee:

[laughs] I just like that the, uh, Nordic metal band, Catamenia, likes to make sure that, you know, they're also melodic.

Justin:

Yeah, that's nice.

Sydnee:

Yeah, that's straight from them not...

Justin:

That's some, uh—

Sydnee:

... that's not me.

Justin:

I do somethin' everybody can enjoy. This is melodic Nordic metal.

Sydnee:

So you mentioned that women are cursed with this illness.

Justin:

That was just, like, a joke for the...

Sydnee:

[sarcastic] Uh-huh. Yeah.

Justin:

... beginning of the show.

Sydnee:

Well, uh, it's apt. There's actually a whole book about the history of menstruation called Cursed, if you want to read that. Um, but the, uh, this was a belief for a long time. When we, kind of, talk about the history of menstrual periods, how they were perceived, what people thought they were caused by, um, there's a strong belief in many cultures that, uh, it was some kind of punishment. Um, in Judeo-Christian belief, um, it was the punishment for Eve eating the apple.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Uh, so childbirth was the ultimate punishment that women have to go through the pain of childbirth, but the pre-cursor to that is once a month she has to go through a menstrual period, which is painful, and causes her to bleed, and if she had just not eaten that apple she wouldn't have to.

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

Um, in Mayan mythology it's also seen as a punishment. Uh, the... It was for, uh, some deity that broke a marital alliance, so she had to bleed once a month and, so there you go.

Um, it, uh, again, and you can, kind of, see this echoed. Um, in Nepal, uh, it's believed that in young girls, before their period, there is a deity, uh, Taleju, who, um, is a part of them, who is, kind of, within them. And then as soon as they have their first period, they become common and are no longer sacred because the goddess has left their bodies.

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

So they are not valued as highly once they start their periods.

Justin:

Friends, you'll notice that I was conspicuously quiet during that, uh, section. We somehow found a way to simultaneously talk about women's health and religion. So there's really not a winning play here for me as play-by-play Joe guy. If there's a fourth rail inside the third rail...

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

... and if you could open the third rail and find a tinier more dangerous rail inside of it, that would be where we just were. So thanks for hangin' in there with me. Sorry about my lack of contribution, I promise I'll try to do better.

Sydnee:

All you can really do during that is just smile and look interested.

Justin:

That's precisely what I did.

Sydnee:

Make some interested hums and hm sounds.

Justin:

Hm. Hm-hm.

Sydnee:

Um, I will say this, because as you look into, and then we'll depart from religion. If... As you look into major world religions, for the most part there is a strong belief that menstruation is, uh, one, some sort of punishment or curse and, two, that it is a time in a women's life when she is, um, impure,

and there are all kinds of restrictions that were placed on her during that time, whether that is, um, you know, simply, maybe you couldn't take holy communion or something much, uh, more intense, like, uh, you couldn't hand somebody something.

A woman could not hand something to a man while she was on her period without it being blessed first, um, because otherwise he would be, I don't know, infected by her menstrual blood. Um, however, uh, if you are a Sikh you do not, you do not feel that way.

Justin:

No?

Sydnee:

No. I have to give them credit. As I did this research, Sikhism is the one religion that, uh, makes the point that it is not impure, there is no problem with menstruation, it is normal.

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

Thank you. That's a... I like that. That's true, scientific.

Justin:

No, [crosstalk]. None of religions have a section just, like, what we are cool with.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Hey, this is all right by us.

Sydnee:

Huh, periods are just fine.

Justin:

That's 'cause they don't make enough of a pitch, you know? The, there's not enough salesmanship in the Bible. Or any Bible. All the Bibles.

Sydnee:

In all the Bibles?

Justin:

Yes, any Bible.

Sydnee:

Well, I just like that— I would love to read exactly what the tenet is that's, like, we are fine with surfing the crimson wave.

Justin:

[laughs] Totally cool.

Sydnee:

Aunt Flow is okay with me.

Justin:

She's got a couch at our place whenever she needs it.

Sydnee:

Um, and I will say that as, you know, we've been talking about how negatively, uh, in, throughout history that a women's menstrual period was perceived, there were some, there was some evidence that certain cultures and certain time periods, it was not necessarily a bad thing, maybe a scary thing, but not necessarily a bad thing.

In prehistoric times, there's evidence that from, I guess, cave drawings. I don't know how ... How do we figure this stuff out?

Justin:

I have no idea.

Sydnee:

That it was...

Justin:

We make it up.

Sydnee:

[laughs] We do. That I'm not making this up, I swear I read it.

Justin:

You lie about it.

Sydnee:

That it was seen as a source of power and, like, creative energy because, uh, the idea was that babies, uh, were thought to be formed from menstrual blood, especially menstrual clots were, formed babies occasionally.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So when they didn't form babies, and instead you just bled, that this was, this was a time that, you know, a woman was very powerful and could do anything at that, you know, at that time. And, uh, kind of, following that theme, let's talk about our old friend, Pliny the Elder.

Justin:

Pliny. I had a great idea, so I must tell you, Pliny the Elder T-Shirts. So it'd be our first Sawbones T-shirt. What it'll be is a stylized Pliny the Elder, but, uh, in the fashion of David the Gnome.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

So capturing the spirit of David the Gnome, but with a Pliny the Elder, uh, spin on it.

Sydnee:

I love this idea.

Justin:

Okay, we'll get those out to you guys soon.

Sydnee:

Uh, and I know, I know everybody's clamoring to learn more about Pliny the Elder. And I'll tell ya, I'm workin' on it guys. But Pliny the Elder had a lot to say about everything. And it—

Justin:

He didn't just restrain himself to medicine.

Sydnee:

No, no, no, no.

Justin:

Everybody can get on that Pliny tip.

Sydnee:

[laughs] As little as there is on the internet about Royal Rife that's true, there is everything on the internet about Pliny the Elder.

Justin:

Some of it is still being written by Pliny the Elder today.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

This is a fact.

Sydnee:

It carries on. It echoes throughout the cosmos...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... for all— He wrote a natural history of everything. Everything.

Justin:

Everything!

Sydnee:

So, what did he have to say about periods? Well, he felt, uh, that during her period a woman was very strong and powerful and [laughs] that if she removed her clothing at the right moment she could stop a hailstorm, or perhaps a whirlwind, or maybe lightning.

Justin:

Boy, uh, somewhere in history, there is a very naked, very wet, very angry woman.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Pliny?"

Sydnee:

I don't know why Helen Hunt didn't try that in Twister. [laughs]

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

That would have been a much more intriguing movie I think.

Justin:

I mean it would certainly be somethin'.

Sydnee:

And she's a nice lookin' lady.

Justin:

I mean that... Uh, especially at that time period. Wow, she was at her peak. That would've been fantastic. Maybe they're saving it for Twister II, I don't know.

Sydnee:

[laughs] She made me want to wear a wife beater...

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

... and look like that in it.

Justin:

She made us all want to wear one.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Um, he also believed ... He had a lot of these beliefs. I think that at the core of this he just wanted women to walk around naked. Um, if you could get naked and walk around a field, like, uh, where you were growing your crops, that it would make all the bugs, and worms, and caterpillars, and stuff fall off all the ears of corn and save your crops.

Justin:

It would certainly make for an unpleasant afternoon either way, I think.

Sydnee:

Uh, wandering naked through a cornfield? Yeah.

Justin:

I would think, yeah.

Sydnee:

I think that's one of those things you're specifically not supposed to do.

Justin:

"I wasn't enjoying this at first, but now there's bugs and worms falling off of everything, so I'm really getting into it now."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Thanks Pliny, you were right."

Sydnee:

He, uh, he also thought that the, uh, smell of menstrual blood would drive dogs mad and that, um, even ants would be repulsed by any, you know, grains or discarded, anything that was touched by it.

Justin:

It's actually, uh, was used as an ancient preservation method. Um, they would mix in menstrual blood with their food supply to keep bugs off.

Sydnee:

And then nothing would touch it.

Justin:

Nothing would touch it.

Sydnee:

That always worked.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, uh, to—

Justin:

Try it at home.

Sydnee:

And he wasn't the only one. Uh, the Cherokee believed that a menstruating woman had the power to destroy her enemies.

Justin:

Um, that one I can vouch for.

Sydnee:

Um, in, uh, in African myth, the, uh, menstrual blood is often used, um, in magical charms, and that can be either to purify someone, which is interesting since we have talked a lot about how, you know, it was seen as an impurity.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

You could purify someone with them, or you could destroy them. I guess it's a different charm. I'm...

Justin:

Very nice. Very nice.

Sydnee:

I'm assuming you add something else. [laughs] Hopefully you don't get those confused.

Justin:

Yeah. "Now this is my destroying menstrual blood, where's the other jar?"

Sydnee:

Um, and there were, you know, uh, there were also some cures that they thought, uh, you know, menstrual blood was responsible for. So, they thought you could use it for warts, uh, for birth marks, uh, gout, goiters, hemorrhoids, epilepsy, worms, leprosy, headaches.

Justin:

A lot of things.

Sydnee:

A lot of things.

Justin:

Yeah, a lot of things.

Sydnee:

And I don't know exactly, I don't— I didn't find a lot of specifics as to how you used it, I'm hoping it was topical.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

I mean, uh, I found a lot of skin stuff, so I'm assuming it was, like, a topical application.

Justin:

It was actually aerosolized.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

They— You would just walk through clouds of it, yeah.

Sydnee:

They spritzed it? Um, you could also use it as, like, a love charm, warding off demons, offering it to gods. And, if you were lucky enough to get the first— I said— I used the word pad that a virgin used, but, uh, they didn't actually have pads.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

We're talking about probably medieval times. But the first whatever device she used for her period, uh, you could use that to cure a plague.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

I didn't know that.

Sydnee:

I mean you couldn't, but.

Justin:

Okay. Yeah, but, right, gotcha.

Sydnee:

Now, I mean, this... And this gave it a lot of power, certainly.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... women who were menstruating and menstrual blood itself. And there was a flip side to that, because, uh, also in medieval times they thought that, you know, it could probably give dogs rabies.

Justin:

Okay, see that one is more confusing, but I guess they're entitled to believe whatever they like.

Sydnee:

You could kill all kinds of things, fruits, beehives, crops. Um, if a woman, uh... So if an older woman, I thought this was interesting, who had had many periods and had not yet gone through menopause, but was close, so just so that she had accumulated a lot of periods in her life...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... if she looked at you, in her gaze she held enough power from years of menstrual bleeding, she could poison you with her gaze.

Justin:

Whoa.

Sydnee:

Yeah, with her period gaze.

Justin:

That explains how Judi Dench keeps winning all these awards.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Very dangerous woman. You do not want to cross Judi Dench.

Sydnee:

It was... It's weird, though, because at the same time they also knew that, um, bleeding was important. Uh, if you remember, we're talking about a time when, you know, blood letting was the cure for everything.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So, uh, so they thought women were, kind of, lucky in a way because it already happened to them.

Justin:

They got, like, a regular... Regular—

Sydnee:

A regular treatment.

Justin:

I gotta pay a lot [laughs] down at...

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

... down at the corner barber for that kind of service.

Sydnee:

[laughs] But it, but that was, uh ... Uh, another way to use blood letting was for women who, for whatever reason, didn't have periods. At the time they wouldn't have understood any of why they weren't having them, um, but they knew that, uh, women are supposed to bleed regularly, so maybe if they don't they'll start to become mannish?

So, um, if you can't get them to have periods with, they, and they had a variety of, like, herbal concoctions to try to make you have a period, if that didn't work, just go down to the barber and, you know, let him bleed you from your arm or whatever.

Justin:

I don't think that's the same thing.

Sydnee:

Uh, it's not.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

It's not.

Justin:

It's so nice when I can puzzle these things out the ancient dudes couldn't. It makes me feel real superior.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Well the, well these, you say ancient dudes. It's great because this kind of, uh, bizarre belief... I don't know why men are so scared of periods. Can you, um, elucidate that for me before we move on?

Justin:

Uh, I mean...

Sydnee:

I mean that's what it seems to a lot of, and we're gonna talk, we're gonna, kind of, move on to, like, what we do about periods through history. But why are men so freaked out by them? It's just blood, man.

Justin:

Okay, well, it's partially the mystery. We've don't like things we don't understand, like, um, opera for example. Um, and also there's a lot of blood, like, if, like in a really bloody opera and that can be upsetting. So, I guess what I'm saying is periods are like opera. They're only appreciated by cultured gentlemen like myself.

Sydnee:

[laughs] And Julia Roberts on Pretty Woman, who really understood it.

Justin:

She really got it.

Sydnee:

Okay, well, I guess I'll accept that.

Justin:

Yes!

Sydnee:

For now.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

We'll probe this sometime further after the show.

Justin:

Okay, sounds good.

Sydnee:

Um, but this kind of, uh, weird bizarre beliefs and fear persisted. In the 1920s there was a Viennese scientist who believed he isolated something called menotoxins.

Justin:

Uh, not real I'm assuming?

Sydnee:

Not that I know of, not that I have found. Uh, but they were secreted through a woman's skin while she was menstruating and they had very specific powers.

Justin:

Okay. Yeah, I like that powers keep coming up.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

This is a great view into the male psyche, though. I don't understand it, it might be deadly, or it might have super powers.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

I'm just gonna leave the option open—

Sydnee:

It might be cool.

Justin:

It might be cool, it might be super powerful, I don't know. I'm just gonna assume that it's either deadly or super powerful.

Sydnee:

Well the power of menotoxins were not necessarily positive, though. They could prevent dough from rising.

Justin:

[snorts]

Sydnee:

[laughs] Which is, kind of, a lame power. Um, and even worse, they could prevent beer from fermenting.

Justin:

Is there a yeast connection? Is that, is that what he's, what they're trying to draw maybe?

Sydnee:

I don't, I don't know. Maybe he—

Justin:

It can, like, fight... It's the only thing that could fight yeast was periods?

Sydnee:

Uh, maybe? But—

Justin:

Guy's put a stop to it. It's gone too far.

Sydnee:

I mean, yeah. I guess, I mean I guess it was something that he thought fought yeast, that makes sense, but I don't know why. I don't know why he thought... I mean maybe that was it.

Justin:

He didn't need answers, he's an old dude.

Sydnee:

Maybe he'd observed that women were not complaining about yeast when they were on their period because...

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

... they're— They got somethin' bigger to deal with?

Justin:

Maybe, I don't know.

Sydnee:

Um, and of course, and of course, uh, there has to be the psych perspective.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

As there is on any woman's problem. At some point, uh, there was a psychiatrist in history who had to tell us what he thought about it.

Justin:

Yeah, right.

Sydnee:

Um, uh, cramping...

Justin:

These guys.

Sydnee:

... which is a— These men, you know how they are. Uh, cramping was, um, is a common symptom of, you know, periods. A lot of women have cramping, uh, before and during their menstrual cycles. And it was seen as a psychological problem, not a physical one. And, um, they advised that women have therapy because she would, uh, a woman is rejecting her own femininity when she has cramps during a period.

Justin:

Uh, I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that one is, um, a misplaced belief.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Yeah, I mean...

Justin:

I don't know if that—

Sydnee:

... yeah.

Justin:

Guys, you're not doing great on this one.

Sydnee:

Well the king of this, of this, let's see what Freud thought.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, Freud thought that, uh, a period is, and this is a quote from him, "The bloody sign of a woman's loss of a penis." [pause]

Justin:

I'm giving you a face.

Sydnee:

I'm assuming that's a figurative, a metaphorical?

Justin:

Just keeping my face completely rigid.

Sydnee:

I think he knew that women didn't actually, like, physically lose a penis?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Uh, but you, uh, he just basically saw it as a sign of, a further sign, 'cause they're, I guess there were others, of women's inferiority in general. Uh, this show has made me not so big a fan of Freud.

Justin:

Yeah. Yeah, I, uh, I don't agree with him on that one, Syd.

Sydnee:

On that one?

Justin:

Uh, yeah.

Sydnee:

On that one you've got a problem?

Justin:

Yeah, uh, he seemed to get... People seem to remember a lot of the stuff that Freud did right, but he seemed to be just, kind of, swinging at every pitch, I think and, uh, he whiffed a lot of 'em I think. We tend to remember the grand slams as they were, to continue my sports metaphor that I understand, and it seems like there were a lot of whiffers.

Sydnee:

So let's talk about what did we do? So we've talked a little bit about periods, what do we do about them through history, you know? What, uh, women were bleeding they have to, they tried to do something. Uh, once they figured out that this was gonna happen every month, and that it probably wasn't an illness, they had to deal with it.

So, you know, early times women probably just used what was available. There's been some evidence that, uh, women attempted to use things like animal skins, moss, ash, grass, sea sponges, wood shavings, just basically whatever you had.

Justin:

I would think moss might work okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah. I mean, I think they were just looking for something absorbent.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

Um, the Egyptians used papyrus... [laughs]

Justin:

Uh—

Sydnee:

... so there's another use for that.

Justin:

They were just showin' off that they invented paper. "What?"

Sydnee:

"You know what else we can use it for?"

Justin:

"Yeah, we can do everything with it, it's amazing. I'm cleaning up a spill right now."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Um, I'm writing you this letter on this papyrus and I'm also wiping my windows. Oh, what's up? You didn't hear about windows yet?"

Sydnee:

[laughs] I feel like that the Egyptians are basically, like, the guys who invented ShamWow now.

Justin:

Yeah. You can do everything with it, paper.

Sydnee:

Um, the, uh, the Romans used wool, um, and then, uh, but the Greeks were, like, forget just wool, uh, we're gonna wrap some wool around some wood and use that, which seems horribly uncomfortable on a side note.

Justin:

Yeah and prominent.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Um, there were plenty of cultures and times in history though when women just, kind of, bled into their clothes, onto the ground, um, I, which I think is really interesting from a cultural perspective. If you can imagine that that was the truth today, that women just walked around...

Justin:

Just goin' for it.

Sydnee:

[laughs] I don't know. It'd certainly change the relationship with men perhaps.

Justin:

Yeah, I could— Ah.

Sydnee:

Make it hard to go to work, I'll tell you that.

Justin:

I think every... I'm full, I'm full on in support of every sort of empowerment that there is for, uh, women and minorities and anybody who is marginalized throughout this great world of ours. I do think that would be a hard look to sell. I don't think there's a level of comfort where you say, "What's that?" "Yeah, I'm just bleedin' into my clothes today."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Like it or whomp it."

Sydnee:

That's gonna be the day.

Justin:

"That's my day, how's yours?"

Sydnee:

Well, if it's a guy and, like, his hemorrhoids are flarin' up that day, we probably wouldn't be so cool with that look.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So I think it goes both ways. Um, and I mean it, uh, we also... You gotta remember that in some of these times when women just kind of went for it, um, men and women were separated. Like, if you look at, like, the biblical recommendations, like, if you just stay way from women. And there's still cultures today that just, you know, send women to a hut, you know, the menstrual hut, and they just go hide away.

Justin:

You know, if you...

Sydnee:

So it's not like they're doing anything.

Justin:

... if you want to talk about— I mean, you mentioned earlier at, uh, and I was, sort of, goofin' about it, but you wanted to talk about why men are, you know, squeamish about periods. I think it's because we have, you know, two millennia of religious doctrine that says that it's something to be afraid of, and shamed, and you know, uh, avoid it at all costs. That kind of, stuff can permeate a culture and be pretty hard to shake, I would imagine.

Sydnee:

I'm sure that's true, because a lot of this, you know, like I said, still persists today in different places. I mean I think that there are, there is stigma about, it, you know, even in our country. Uh, but if you go to, you know, some other cultures, uh, the menstrual hut still exists. I mean women are still sequestered and—

Justin:

It's right next to the Sunglasses Hut.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Not as popular, but free Wifi, so I don't know.

Sydnee:

In medieval times, uh, they dealt with it by... Uh, there were, again, many women at the time who would just have their period in their clothes. Um, so they would wear, like, flowers or carry nutmeg to ward off the smell so that you wouldn't know.

Uh, there was also belief that you could stop it faster if you would burn a toad in a pot and then, like, grind that into powder and then put that in a bag at your waist and carry it around. Which I guess also would hide the smell, because then you'd deal with the smell of a...

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... a burnt, powdered toad.

Justin:

So... Yeah, I'm not sure that's a step up.

Sydnee:

And that you could also deal with it, or make it go away— I mean that's what the belief was, that you could make it go away faster by doing that or by tying animal hair around a young tree, which I, kind of, like these beliefs

'cause, I mean it's gonna stop. Probably, for most women, it's gonna stop in a few days so, I mean, I guess it always works.

Justin:

Well that's similar to like, uh, it's, like, cold treatments, right?

Sydnee:

Well, yeah, exactly.

Justin:

"Hey, it stopped!" Well, yeah, I mean it stopped.

Sydnee:

I mean it usually does.

Justin:

Yeah, that's how it goes.

Sydnee:

Um, well, I talked about how difficult it would be to go to work if you weren't using some, kind of, you know, barrier between yourself and the ground while you're on your period and that certainly was one way that we dealt with it.

Um, in the 1700s, I think this is great, no women worked in the opium industry in Saigon. [laughs]

Justin:

Yeah, they ran a tight ship there.

Sydnee:

You— [laughs] No, they didn't, they thought it would make the opium taste bitter if you had a woman who was menstruating there.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, in 1800s in Europe, uh, [laughs] the women, again, since they didn't use anything, they weren't allowed to work in the sugar refineries in France or in the pickling factories in the U.K., which I don't think is a big sacrifice, personally.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, it was... I think it was pickling meat and I don't even know how that works. So, I think if the biggest sacrifice that I have to make is you're—Um, I can't pickle meat, I'm good with that.

Justin:

Yeah. I'm still sorry about that though. I think everybody should be able to pickle meat if they want to.

Sydnee:

If they want to. Uh, by the late 1800s the first pads were created. Uh, it was interesting. Most of them at the time, they weren't, they didn't have, you know, the, um ... There's adhesive on the back of pads, you might not know that, sanitary napkins?

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

They stick inside your underwear?

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, but they didn't have that and so most [laughs] of them were held in place by, like, belts.

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

They didn't even consistently have underwear yet, so.

Justin:

Like— Where function meets fashion.

Sydnee:

[laughs] So you would have these belts. You could make, like, a home-made little muslin belt that you would wear with your pad. And, um, there were also, uh, um, they moved onto some more absorbent things. Like they started using the same material that they used diapers, uh, that they used for diapers and— ... And they also had things, like, period bloomers and period aprons and I can't even picture what those must have been like.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

No, a whole ordeal is what I'm guessing. Um—

Justin:

A whole production that's underwear-like.

Sydnee:

A whole production— "These are my period bloomers. Okay, I'm out."

Justin:

Okay, yeah. That seems like a whole production.

Sydnee:

That's... Uh, you know, maybe that's, like, a euphemism for, like, I'm just having one of those bad, like, um, days where I'm just gonna lay on the couch. I'm in my period bloomers today.

Justin:

I can't come to lunch, I'm already in my period bloomers.

Sydnee:

Mm-hmm. It's kind of like my cookie pants. Um, in World War I, French nurses realized that the celluloid bandages that they used, well, for wounds also worked well for that, so they started using that, which expired for their pad technology.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Uh, Kotex were invented soon after that. And, um, by '32 we had the menstrual cup.

Justin:

Finally, the answer to periods, it finally comes on the scene. I'm sorry it took us that long to invent 'em. Flash forward...

Sydnee:

Do you know what a menstrual cup is?

Justin:

... flash forward, uh, 80-some years and we are still using menstrual cups today.

Sydnee:

Now, to be fair, there are some women who do use menstrual cups.

Justin:

That's still a thing?

Sydnee:

It is still a thing. It's not something that I use personally or am familiar with, but I've read about it. And there are menstrual cups which are literally little flexible plastic cups.

Justin:

I've never— Uh, I've probably bought more tampons in the last 10 years than you have and I have never seen menstrual cups on the shelves.

Sydnee:

I have to imagine it's a, uh, maybe a country by country thing and maybe it's just not popular, or maybe it's regional. Maybe it's not popular in this region. Um, 'cause it wasn't something that as a young girl asking her mom what to do, you know, about getting her monthly visitor, I don't think she ever introduced to me the concept of the menstrual cup.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, but it's out there and some women use it. And you just, kind of, put it up inside your vagina and it catches all the blood, as you may imagine.

Justin:

Ladies, if you at home use a menstrual cup or know someone who does, um, well I mean just keep goin' for it.

Sydnee:

What are you gonna do, ask us?

Justin:

Good for, you know, good.

Sydnee:

You want 'em to ask 'em about it?

Justin:

I hope it's workin' for you.

Sydnee:

No, don't... You don't have to share that private information. You... I mean if you want to, but, uh, you can, we can refrain from that.

Justin:

What about tampons, Syd?

Sydnee:

The next year, 1933.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Tampons finally came around.

Justin:

Someone said, "This is ridiculous— Cups?"

Sydnee:

Saving us all from, um, belts that went with our pads and...

Justin:

Bloomers, special bloomers...

Sydnee:

...sticks wrapped in wool, [laughs] and special period bloomers. Um, so tampons are born and then, of course, today we have a variety of colors, and styles, and all kinds of commercials of women dancing and doing yoga to demonstrate how well they work, so.

Justin:

[laughs] If they're not eating yogurt, they're not being bothered by their period solution.

Sydnee:

The only other time you see women having that much fun in a commercial is when they have herpes.

Justin:

[laughs] Is that everything Syd? That's the whole topic?

Sydnee:

I mean I think... There's no, like, modern concept of menstruation. Like I said, it's not an illness, so I guess we cleared that up for you. And, um...

Justin:

And I did it, yes! I got through an entire episode about menstruation and didn't say anything completely stupid and embarrass myself, so I feel really good. That's, that was a real high-wire act there folks. I want to thank, uh, my dad, my mom, everybody...

Sydnee:

I mean—

Justin:

...who has helped to shape me throughout my life.

Sydnee:

... uh, wait. No, you did open the show by calling periods an illness.

Justin:

That was a bit, everybody knew that was a bit. No, I did it and I'm so proud of myself. I'm also proud of you. I'm really proud of me. Uh, that was a tough one, and I hung in there, and gosh, I just couldn't... I'm ready to pop, I'm so proud.

Sydnee:

That's really great.

Justin:

Thank you.

Sydnee:

Is this your biggest accomplishment you'd say of the week or...?

Justin:

To date, yes. Uh...

Sydnee:

Oh, to date. Oh.

Justin:

[laughs] Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for listening to our show Sawbones. We hope you enjoyed it. We're here every Tuesday. Uh, thank you to Sarah and Emma, both of whom suggested menstruation as a topic. If—

Sydnee:

Yeah, you guys have been clamoring for this and so here it is.

Justin:

Here you go...

Sydnee:

In all it's glory.

Justin:

... everybody, uh, enjoy.

Um, if you would like to suggest a, uh, historical medical topic for us to talk about, email us, sawbones@maximumfun.org. What's that I said, maximumfun.org? Well, yes, that's where you can find all the shows in the Maximum Fun network, like Jordan, Jesse, Go!, Stop Podcasting Yourself, Judge John Hodgman...

Sydnee:

My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Justin:

Oh, thank you so much Sydnee, I really—

Sydnee:

Always, always.

Justin:

Uh...

Sydnee:

Even though you're tryin' to steal our Tuesday thunder.

Justin:

Sorry, I just messed it up. I had... We were late. There's a new episode of MBMBaM, if you want to go listen to that, uh, after you're done here and you tell a bunch of people to listen to our show, of course.

Uh, thank you to people, uh, tweeting about our show, like Ethan Horn, Rowen White, Nicole, Mike D, Rick Butler, Chris Sparks, Bryan Littman, uh, Bryan Kelly, J. Butler, Georgina Penny, Donald Fall, Bill Smitt, Cassie, Jenna, Sarah, Gus, Devon, Andy, so many others, thank you so much. Uh...

Sydnee:

Thanks for tweetin' at us. You can Tweet at Justin if you want to @justinmcelroy.

Justin:

And she's @sydneemcelroy, S-Y-D-N-E-E, M-C-E-L-R-O-Y. I want to thank Dave Lavender from Herald-Dispatch, he did a great, uh, piece about us, uh, in the newspaper on Sunday. Got the whole front page of the Life section. Great job.

Sydnee:

That's right and took adorable pictures. We were drinking from the same soda. Do you remember that?

Justin:

Yeah, I remember.

Sydnee:

You were so cute.

Justin:

Thank you to Laurie.

Sydnee:

It was like an Archie comic, I loved it.

Justin:

Thanks to Laurie, uh, she took the pictures for the article. Um, and you can find those on our Twitter feed. We're @Sawbones, uh, and you can go follow us there and look for the link to that, 'cause I tweeted it.

And I think that's gonna do it for us. If you get a chance this week, if you could, uh, head over to iTunes, give us a review, and tell some friends about the show, gosh, we'd sure appreciate it. And, uh, I think that's gonna do it for us. Uh, until next Tuesday, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

And as always don't drill a hole in your head.

[theme music plays]

MaximumFun.org

Comedy and culture.

Artist owned.

Listener supported.