

Sawbones 28: Leprosy

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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:

Syd. Sydnee. Syd McElroy.

Sydnee:

Yes, Justin McElroy?

Justin:

Sydnee McElroy, co-host of Sawbones, A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine.

Sydnee:

Yes, do you have a question, Justin McElroy?

Justin:

That's me.

Sydnee:

Other co-host?

Justin:

It's me, Justin. Listen, I don't want to panic you, uh, but— Bitter irony—

Sydnee:

Uh-huh.

Justin:

Uh, to report. After almost 30 episodes of talking about disease, I myself, have contracted a disease.

Sydnee:

Oh. Um, who told you that, uh...

Justin:

I'm gonna show you.

Sydnee:

Where did... Okay.

Justin:

I'm gonna show you, Syd.

Sydnee:

Are you sure?

Justin:

Strengthen your resolve, Sydnee.

Sydnee:

Is this just another one of those times you think—

Justin:

No, no, no. I'm positive, Syd.

Sydnee:

Maybe.

Justin:

Sydster, listen.

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

I have contracted leprosy. Ugh.

Sydnee:

Leprosy?

Justin:

Oh, it feels good just to get it off my chest. I'm so sorry to burden you with this. I—

Sydnee:

How do you even know...

Justin:

I'll show you. I'll show you—

Sydnee:

...what leprosy is?

Justin:

But please, strengthen your stomach because this is gonna be hard for you to see, and it's going to mean some big changes for us. Okay, are you... Are you braced?

Sydnee:

Yes, honey.

Justin:

Look at this.

Sydnee:

Wh— That?

Justin:

Yeah, right here, under my chin.

Sydnee:

Are— I mean, it— Honey, it looks like you cut yourself shaving.

Justin:

No, it's bleeding, and there's skin missing.

Sydnee:

Well, yeah. I mean— It kinda looks like you nicked yourself with your...
When did you notice this?

Justin:

After I shaved.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Honey, you just cut yourself shaving. It's...

Justin:

Okay, wait. Wait, wait—

Sydnee:

It's not leprosy.

Justin:

Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Look at this!

Sydnee:

This?

Justin:

Right here on my sleeve. Under my sleeve.

Sydnee:

Honey, that's a freckle.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

That's been there, like literally, since I've known you.

Justin:

Okay. Kind of a Doubting Thomas, fine.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Well, no. I mean, it's not. It's a freckle.

Justin:

I have one more.

Sydnee:

It's fine.

Justin:

I have one more. Look at this. Dun dun dun.

Sydnee:

Honey, I think that's some jelly from your toast earlier.

Justin:

Uh—

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Um, yeah, okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

That's jelly.

Sydnee:

See? It tastes pretty good.

Justin:

It... And it's not leprosy?

Sydnee:

No, that's, that's jelly. It's delicious.

Justin:

How would you even know?

Sydnee:

How would I know the difference between leprosy and jelly?

Justin:

How does anybody know the difference between leprosy and jelly?

Sydnee:

Well, to be fair, um, throughout human history, we haven't always been great at telling the difference between leprosy and other diseases, although I don't know that it was often confused with jelly.

Justin:

Uh... I mean, there's a first time for everything.

Sydnee:

Um, usually you can tell because jelly's so much more delicious than leprosy.

Justin:

Right, correct.

Sydnee:

Uh, but to be fair, we're... We now have much more sophisticated methods of figuring that out.

Justin:

Like— Well, take me back to the beginning of leprosy, and maybe by the end of this episode you can convince me that that's not what I've been... I mean, let's just call what I'm stricken with.

Sydnee:

Right. Okay. And in the meantime, maybe you could get some toast.

Justin:

Uh, for the jelly. Right.

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

Ha ha, very... A leprosy joke. I get it.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Okay.

Justin:

Very funny.

Sydnee:

Not a leprosy joke.

Justin:

Yeah, hilarious.

Sydnee:

It was about jelly. It went way around. So, leprosy dates back, if you didn't know this, Justin, to probably 4,000 BC, maybe longer. Um...

Justin:

That's a long time.

Sydnee:

Yeah. It's been around a really long time. They took DNA from a corpse from Old Jerusalem, and they figured that it had leprosy from the DNA.

Justin:

Okay. Uh, what, it was missing some skin? Yeah, ancient scientist. Yeah, I would think—

Sydnee:

I think it was, just, like a bet. Like, "Hey. I bet they had leprosy."

Justin:

"I bet they had leprosy. Where's his nose?"

Sydnee:

"I mean, we've heard a lot about it, somebody had to have it."

Justin:

"He might have leprosy. I don't know."

Sydnee:

And—

Justin:

"He's missing some stuff. He don't look good."

Sydnee:

Well, yeah. It's...

Justin:

It's a mummy.

Sydnee:

Like, thousands of years old. Um, and all throughout history, different, you know... Hippocrates talked about it in 460. I mean, this is... This is probably one of our oldest and most, uh, discussed diseases...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... throughout history.

Justin:

Yeah. I mean, it's one of those that pops up in, in the Bible a decent amount.

Sydnee:

Absolutely, yeah.

Justin:

To, to an extent where I... You kind of start to assume, like, half the people had it. It comes up a lot.

Sydnee:

Um, do you know where the word leprosy comes from?

Justin:

Come on, Syd.

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Obviously not.

Sydnee:

Okay. So, there are two, two possibilities. There's the Indo-European term lap, which means the removal of scales.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So they thought because of some of the appearance of some of the skin lesions, that perhaps could be where it's from. Or from lepra, which is the Greek word for scales. I mean, I figure that it's probably from the same common root.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

You know, both things. But anyway, that's where the word leprosy comes from. Um, and again, that's because of the appearance of some of the skin. Now, there are a lot of... Before I kind of tell you the history, uh, let me just say that, uh, a lot of people don't really understand what leprosy causes, like what the disease leprosy, what... How that manifests in a person.

Justin:

Shameful. It's like, read a book, you know?

Sydnee:

Right. They think it's, like, you know, when they nick themselves shaving, or maybe jelly.

Justin:

Possi— Eh, well, agree to disagree.

Sydnee:

But there's a lot of misconception about, uh, people having leprosy and, like, losing body parts, and, um... I don't know. I just think people's vision of leprosy is not quite what it... What it was, or is today.

Justin:

Okay, well clear it up for us. What is it... What does leprosy really look like?

Sydnee:

Okay, so there are different forms, so it depends on which form of leprosy you have, but it could just present as some, um, like, uh, numb, pale patches on your skin, some areas on your skin where the, the color changes, and they become numb because it, it also damages nerve tissue.

Um, you can have areas which actually, you know, the skin becomes thickened, and scaly, and forms nodules. There is possibility of, like, nasal deformity, and you can lose, you know, parts of your, like, the nasal structure, parts of your nose as a result.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, and then you can have weakness as well, and, and kind of this, uh, diffuse, like, nervous system involvement, where your hands and feet and legs and arms eventually become numb, or weak, or, you know, the nerves becomes damaged. Uh, but that's, that's very different from, I think, what we picture. And again, it depends on the patient and it depends on which form you have.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

It's really slow growing, this disease. It has a super long incubation period, so it's really hard to figure out when people got it. Um, it's usually three to five years that you carry it around before you ever have a symptom.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

Uh, but it...

Justin:

So you're saying I could have it right now and just not know it.

Sydnee:

Oh, let's not.

Justin:

Possibly.

Sydnee:

Probably not.

Justin:

Okay. Why not?

Sydnee:

Because, this is interesting, do you know that about 95% of the population is not susceptible to infection?

Justin:

That does make me feel better, slightly better.

Sydnee:

I think that's a pretty staggering statistic, 'cause I got the same impression, that, like, biblically, everybody had leprosy.

Justin:

Basically.

Sydnee:

Uh, but just, it has to do as much with your immune system's reaction, uh, to the bacterium as it does to the disease itself. Uh, so like I said, 95% of people are not, you know... Even after coming into contact with it, are not going to actually become infected. And it's transmitted by nasal droplets. It usually has to be long sustained contact, so you've got to hang around people a long time.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So, it's not something that you're just gonna pass somebody in a hallway and get. Um, there's some evidence that maybe broken skin, too, but...

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

But it's not easy to get and it's not common.

Justin:

Got it. Okay. I'm feeling better, I'm feeling comfortable discussing this now.

Sydnee:

And you can only get it from humans, maybe armadillos.

Justin:

Wait, what?

Sydnee:

Well, I don't know that there are actually cases of armadillo to human transmission, but I do think it's interesting that armadillos, in this country, in the US, uh, happen to be a natural reservoir for leprosy.

Justin:

A, a rich vein of natural leprosy.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Out—

Justin:

Just the way mom used to make.

Sydnee:

That's their greatest defense mechanism.

Justin:

A national... A reservoir, like, we—

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

We need to store it?

Sydnee:

Well, no, that's a term.

Justin:

It's a term?

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

The armadillos are reservoirs for...

Justin:

That's kind of science-y. It's a little jargon-y.

Sydnee:

Sorry.

Justin:

For my taste. I prefer to just paint all armadillos with a broad brush and call them what they are, which is demonic spreaders of pestilence.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

I know your game. You think it's so cute the way you roll up into a ball like a giant pill bug. I'm onto you, armadillos.

Sydnee:

It's great because that's the only thing that's keeping us from all wanting to hug and cuddle armadillos...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Of course, is the leprosy. Otherwise, they're such cuddly creatures.

Justin:

God, if I saw an armadillo in real life, I would already lose my mind. But now, I'm gonna see that that roly-poly guy and think, "Oh man, you've got leprosy."

Sydnee:

Are you afraid of armadillos?

Justin:

I'm pretty afraid of all wildlife, but...

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Especially armadillos are very foreign. They're like little dinosaurs.

Sydnee:

You should have seen once, there was a raccoon...

Justin:

Oh, my God.

Sydnee:

...out on our fire scape and Justin saw it.

Justin:

It was a raccoon there where I am a human.

Sydnee:

I thought he was gonna lose his mind.

Justin:

It was just there in my trash. Oh, my God, I can't think about that.

Sydnee:

They look so cute with their little masks.

Justin:

I can't think about it. It's like a furry burglar.

Sydnee:

Their little bandit masks.

Justin:

I can't think about that right now. I'm trying to do a comedy podcast and you're making me live this traumatic experience.

Sydnee:

I'm sorry.

Justin:

Move on.

Sydnee:

I'm sorry. All right. Let's talk about the Bible.

Justin:

Finally.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Let's move into something...

Justin:

It's the only thing I find scarier than raccoons.

Sydnee:

Let's move into something that's not controversial at all.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Let's talk about religion. In the Bible, you know, it divides leprosy into clean leprosy and unclean leprosy.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Uh, which are not actual medical categories of any significance. Um, unclean leprosy was probably leprosy. You know, when they... When they talk about a patient who had unclean leprosy, that probably was the real deal. They talked about changes in their skin, um, losing... Again, losing body parts, probably focusing on the nose, 'cause that is something that can happen, um, but, but big skin lesions.

So, when they referred to somebody who had that, that they probably got it right. Then they talked about clean leprosy. Clean leprosy...

Justin:

It's kind of the decaf of the leprosy world.

Sydnee:

...was— And clean— And these people were treated differently. If you had unclean leprosy, um, you would not get around these people, they were completely quarantined off from the rest of society, and if any of their, uh... If they touched anything that you owned, you would burn it.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, clean leprosy was not treated the same way. Uh, these were people who just had... Their skin lost its pigment, so maybe this actually included some people who had leprosy, but it also probably included a lot of people who had vitiligo.

Justin:

What's vitiligo?

Sydnee:

It's a skin condition where, you know, uh, people with, uh, darker pigmented skin lose the melanin, so...

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

Like Michael Jackson.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Yeah. And so, people would become paler. And, uh, so there were probably a lot of people who actually just had vitiligo who were thrown into this category.

Justin:

Doesn't seem fair.

Sydnee:

Uh, and this was— This was common. There's a lot of stuff that's discussed, uh, in the Bible and then, you know, from the years that follow, and the time periods that follow, that was called leprosy that again, probably wasn't.

Uh, psoriasis was mistaken for leprosy. Uh, tinea capitis, or like, um, a fungal infection of the scalp, 'cause you would lose, like a patch of hair, and it didn't look very pleasant, so they thought was, you know, leprosy. Um, and there were all kinds of fungal infections of the skin, you know, athlete's foot probably would have been mistaken for leprosy back then.

Justin:

Bad spray tans. Anything.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Exactly. Snooki has leprosy.

Justin:

I knew it. That actually makes a lot of sense.

Sydnee:

[laughs] She hid it in her hair. Um...

Justin:

That's an armadillo up there. Did you know?

Sydnee:

Now, eventually, uh, we figured out what is and isn't leprosy in 1873, uh, when a doctor G.H. Armauer, Armauer, Hansen. Armoire?

Justin:

The least popular Hanson brother.

Sydnee:

[laughs] In Norway, uh, discovered the causative agent, microbacterium leprae, so kind of related to tuberculosis, same family there.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, he identified the agent that caused disease, um, because it was actually, in the 1800s, pretty rampant in Norway, and Iceland, and England, and...

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

...and those regions. Um, that's why leprosy is also known as Hansen's Disease. Did you know that?

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Not just... I always thought they were there for getting Mm Bop stuck in your head, but that's... It's good to know that I was incorrect.

Sydnee:

Yes. And Hansen's Disease is not named for Hanson.

Justin:

What?

Sydnee:

It's not named for the band. We didn't name leprosy after the band Hanson—

Justin:

Right, we...

Sydnee:

'Cause why would we?

Justin:

We named it after that guy Hansen you were just talking about, I assume?

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

'Cause why would name it after the band, Justin? [laughs]

Justin:

Right. The premise of the show is that I don't know about medicine. I'm not like, a high functioning child.

Sydnee:

I'm just making sure.

Justin:

I mean, I have my cognitive abilities. [laughter]

Sydnee:

I mean, I'm just saying, like, why would we name it after the band?

Justin:

If you put, like... If you, like, held—

Sydnee:

What would they have to do with leprosy? They didn't figure anything out.

Justin:

Yeah. If you like, held up a picture of a werewolf, I wouldn't like, run behind a couch and start peeing myself. Like, I have my faculties about me.

Sydnee:

Do you remember how afraid you got a few minutes ago, when I was remembering the raccoon that was on the fire escape of an apartment we lived in...

Justin:

How have we tried to treat—

Sydnee:

...five years ago?

Justin:

How have we tried to... How have we tried to treat this over the years, Sydnee?

Sydnee:

Like a lot of the diseases we talk about on this show. Uh, leprosy was seen as a punishment, or a curse from God, or the Gods. You know, you did something wrong and now this horrible thing has been visited upon you.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

And so, pray. Get right with God, have holy people pray over. Um, hopefully, it'll go away. Uh, that's probably the oldest treatment for anything, I think would be fair to say.

Justin:

Still probably the most widely prescribed, too, for any... For any ailment as a first line.

Sydnee:

You know, you... That's a good point. That's probably the longest existing treatment for anything.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Besides rub some dirt in it.

Sydnee:

[laughs] One of my dad's favorites.

Justin:

And Adam.

Sydnee:

Also run it off.

Justin:

Run that off, Caleb.

Sydnee:

Run it off, or...

Justin:

Caleb?

Sydnee:

Or—

Justin:

What was that fool's name? Cain, Abel. Combined them. Caleb. [laughs]

Sydnee:

Caleb. [laughs] The third son, Caleb.

Justin:

The third son, Caleb.

Sydnee:

I don't... I don't know his story.

Justin:

That's cause nobody does. It's lost to time.

Sydnee:

That must have just been— That was just in your Baptist Bible.

Justin:

He was, as it turns out, an armadillo. A lot of people don't know that about Caleb.

Sydnee:

He had leprosy, it was very sad. He terrified Justin in his later years.
[laughs]

Justin:

Scariest Bible story is not Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as you may have assumed, but rather, Caleb the armadillo. [laughter] A half man, half, uh, armadillo.

Sydnee:

C- Caleb the armadillo is my favorite Veggie Tale.

Justin:

[laughs] All right. This is goofy. Move on. Come on.

Sydnee:

Oh. Okay.

Justin:

Got a lot stuff to talk about here.

Sydnee:

So, if prayer doesn't work, what else? Let's try blood. Um, that's what everybody likes to try, right?

Justin:

It's a good first line. It seems very... There's a lot of power we assign to it, I think.

Sydnee:

Uh, absolutely, and the Greeks tried it, the Egyptians, uh, the Chinese, they all tried blood for leprosy. You could either rub it on, you know, the affected areas or you could drink it.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, originally, the blood you would prefer, virgin blood or perhaps child blood.

Justin:

Mm. Mm.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

Yeah, and you know we didn't have like, a great way of getting that blood out. We didn't have, like, cool syringes and things.

Sydnee:

Well, no. Cool syringes?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Like ones that kids would like? Like...

Justin:

No, [laughs] I don't mean like, syringes...

Sydnee:

With My Little Ponies on them or Power Rangers, or something?

Justin:

I just mean— No, not like, decals.

Sydnee:

Like, "Hey, check it out."

Justin:

I mean, like, just in the way that syringes would have been cool to Cro-Magnons back then.

Sydnee:

No. I don't want to think about where the virgin and child blood came from. Um, in... I guess in a more humane period, we switched to animal blood. I still don't know that that's humane, so lamb or dog's blood...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

...was used. Do you know that this carried on until 1790?

Justin:

Sheesh.

Sydnee:

That's a long time.

Justin:

Yeah, we kind of took a breather on treating leprosy, huh?

Sydnee:

Yeah, a lot of... A lot of blood.

Justin:

Yikes.

Sydnee:

Now, there were other things thrown in there from time to time. Um, snake venom was a popular suggestion, um, especially cobra. And, uh, you know who was a big fan of that?

Justin:

Let me guess.

Sydnee:

Guess.

Justin:

Pliny the Elder.

Sydnee:

Uh, you're gonna say it right now, aren't you?

Justin:

Apparently it's Pliny, folks.

Sydnee:

So apparently, our friend Ply-ny the Elder is actually Plin-y the Elder.

Justin:

But I think we... Can we stick with Plyny?

Sydnee:

I prefer Plyny. It's so much funnier.

Justin:

It's just funnier. Yeah. It's much funnier.

Sydnee:

Think about it. Plyny.

Justin:

Plyny. Pliny... I... It's 'cause it's from Plinius, I think, is the shortened... Anyway, Plyny. Right?

Sydnee:

Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm wrong.

Justin:

I feel like I could find another medical history podcast.

Sydnee:

I'm wrong, but I'm sticking with Plyny.

Justin:

Let's go with it.

Sydnee:

Um, if you don't have a snake...

Justin:

I don't.

Sydnee:

...you could try some scorpion venom, [laughter] perhaps a poisonous frog.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Or there was some kind of, uh, climbing fish that you could use, it had some kind of venom.

Justin:

Okay. That's...

Sydnee:

Um...

Justin:

That's horrifying, but... "Oh, oh, fish can climb now, and they're poisonous. Fantastic."

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

"Just the thing to take my mind off my leprosy."

Sydnee:

And you know if there are poisonous climbing fish, they definitely exist in the Ohio River.

Justin:

Yeah, absolutely.

Sydnee:

We definitely have them here.

Justin:

No question. Four eyes. Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, you know, eventually this would, uh, morph into increasing doses of bee stings.

Justin:

What?

Sydnee:

You don't want to try snake venom, let's just, uh, [laughs] sting you with a bunch of bees and see if it fixed your leprosy.

Justin:

I mean, it took my mind of my leprosy.

Sydnee:

Yeah, leprosy was the worst of my problems.

Justin:

I'm covered in bees.

Sydnee:

Hey, is... Was that the secret story that was going on in My Girl? [laughter]

Justin:

That movie is a treasure and I will not have it denigrated on this or any other podcast.

Sydnee:

Sorry. If you... Do you remember scarification, we talked about that once before?

Justin:

Mm, wasn't it like a... Something you did with, like, a sharp metal thing?

Sydnee:

Yeah, a sharp metal thing. You could... You cut people, and scar them, and make...

Justin:

It's in the—

Sydnee:

Damage the skin, and...

Justin:

It's in the family of, um, of, uh, trepanation, right? Isn't that when we talked about it?

Sydnee:

Uh, no. Yeah, I think we did talk about it...

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

...in trepanation. Um, you could do it with or without [laughs] arsenic, however you prefer.

Justin:

I'll take without the...

Sydnee:

So cut people off, and... Or cut people up and then pour arsenic in their wounds.

Justin:

None for me, thanks.

Sydnee:

Um, in the Middle Ages they tried castration.

Justin:

Mm. Mm.

Sydnee:

Which probably, to be fair, was as much to prevent them from having children as to actually try to fix it.

Justin:

It would pass that way?

Sydnee:

Huh?

Justin:

You think it would pass that way? Would it pass genetically?

Sydnee:

No, it doesn't.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

No. One very popular treatment for decades was chaulmoogra oil... Chaulmoogra oil. Uh, a lot of people have probably heard of this. Um, it's from a tree. Uh, there's some confusion over which tree, but the important thing for you to know is it's from a tree. The active ingredient is hydnocarpic acid, and it has a bunch of fatty acids in it too. And that, that acid is antibacterial.

Justin:

Hm.

Sydnee:

It really is. So, the thought was that you could, um, either, like, turn it into a mixture, like suspended in gum, or an emulsion, or something. You could put it on topically. Uh, they tried to give it to people orally, um, but it made you really, really nauseous.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

When that didn't work, they tried to give it to people rectally. Don't know if that would have been my next move.

Justin:

No, me neither.

Sydnee:

But that was bad, 'cause then it caused ulcers.

Justin:

Ugh. I don't know if this is a good solution.

Sydnee:

So instead, they started injecting it into people, IV or, uh, intravenously, or intramuscularly.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, they... You know, did it work or not? I don't know. Uh, there's some information that maybe it was successful at times.

Justin:

Really?

Sydnee:

Maybe it helped for a little bit. It didn't help in the long run...

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, probably, uh, but there is... Was some evidence that maybe... I mean, and this was used for quite a long time, like all the way up until we had actual medications for leprosy.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

People were using chaulmoogra oil.

Justin:

It's interesting. It seems like because of the... And this is just, like, a... This is, again, some of my classic speculation, but it seems to me that perhaps the Biblical stigma, because it was so... Had such a reputation of being connected to being dirty, or being...

Sydnee:

Okay.

Justin:

Unclean, that maybe we weren't as...

Sydnee:

Uh-huh.

Justin:

'Cause we... These are really long for treatments. We don't normally cling to stuff like this that isn't working for, like, centuries.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

That maybe there wasn't the rush to try to treat it and take care of it.

Sydnee:

I think you're... I think that's a very good point because as I looked for a lot of different treatments, um, I didn't find the usual just lists and lists of weird stuff that we gave people to eat, or drink, or paste all over the body.

You know, I mean usually, I look up these illnesses and I find just pages and pages of... "And then try this tree, and then try this plant, and then—"

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

You know. Uh, and it's not out there, as far as I can tell, for leprosy. We found this chaulmoogra oil, which seemed to work maybe, and we stuck with it for a long time. There are a handful of other weird treatments in there, but sadly, uh, I think because you're right, uh, for a long time, it was seen as the patient's fault...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

...so they did something wrong, that they were dirty in some way.

Justin:

They were cursed or something.

Sydnee:

And then, the other thing, the last thing I kind of wanted to talk about, I guess, in terms of treatment, although this isn't really a treatment, it was one of the things that was done for people who had leprosy was quarantine. Um, it was very common, all throughout history, that if you had leprosy, you were kept away from the general population.

Um, the reasoning for this was twofold. One to protect everybody else from you because, you know, the belief was that leprosy was very contagious. In reality, it wasn't, but the, the fear was that if you touched someone with leprosy, you would get it.

Justin:

Right, which, which we've already talked about is inaccurate.

Sydnee:

Right. Uh, but then, it also was because of the stigma against people with leprosy, they were the common... They were a common target of violence.

Justin:

Oh, wow.

Sydnee:

And murder, so, uh, keeping, uh, people with leprosy in quarantine was, was also for their protection. Um, if they weren't in quarantine, they had to, uh, especially throughout the Middle Ages, wear bells or clappers, um, as they were— To ring, or to, you know, clap together as they were moving through crowds so that people would know they were coming and be able to move away from them.

Justin:

That's actually what the song Silver Bells was written about, did you know that?

Sydnee:

No, it's not.

Justin:

It's not, but it could— What if it was? What a twist that would have been.

Sydnee:

It's a good story though.

Justin:

Yeah, I'm gonna just keep saying it.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Keep saying it until somebody believes it.

Justin:

That's how legends begin.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Justin makes them up.

Justin:

I make them up, you're welcome.

Sydnee:

Uh, they even... Depending on which way the wind was blowing, they had to walk on a certain side of the street so that people wouldn't...

Justin:

Ugh, gosh.

Sydnee:

...have to breathe them in, people who passed them.

Justin:

Cut them a break.

Sydnee:

I know.

Justin:

They already have leprosy.

Sydnee:

So, and... Which is why so many people ended up in, um, leper asylums, or leprosarium is what they were called.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, all... They started in the 13th Century, all the way through to the 20th Century we had these. Um...

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Yeah. All across Europe and Asia, and eventually into the US. Uh, at their peak, there were probably 19,000 in existence at one time. There were colonies, uh, like, um... Especially some of the monastic orders, so a monastery would kind of sponsor like, a colony of people who had leprosy, so they didn't actually have to be in a building. 'Cause a lot of these places were similar to, like, psychiatric asylums.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, they were called leper colonies, and, uh, the idea was that we would just have, like, a little community where you could only live if you had leprosy.

Justin:

Syd. Do you think that at least one of those colonies, they learned martial arts? How sweet would that have been?

Sydnee:

Why would that have been sweet?

Justin:

Just, like, imagine it. An army of people with leprosy, and you're like, "Hey, look at the leper." And then he was like, "What did you say to me?" And it's like, just did martial arts all over him. I just think that would be a sweet movie. I just wanted to tell you that I thought that would be a sweet movie.

Sydnee:

Well, maybe.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Who knows what those monks were up to?

Justin:

Yeah. That's what I wanted to hear. Thank you.

Sydnee:

I mean, hey.

Justin:

Maybe, right?

Sydnee:

Maybe they were teaching them martial arts. Do monks know that?

Justin:

Some of them.

Sydnee:

They box, right, or is that just priests?

Justin:

Video games... Video games have taught me that all monks know martial arts.

Sydnee:

They make beer.

Justin:

Why couldn't they...

Sydnee:

They probably know martial arts.

Justin:

Why can't they train people with leprosy to kill?

Sydnee:

You get drunk, you want to do some martial arts.

Justin:

Why not?

Sydnee:

Um, a lot of that was based on... The reason that monks got involved is that they thought that, um, someone who had leprosy was actually in purgatory on earth, that their suffering was holier than the suffering of other sick people because having leprosy was a way that you had already died, but you were stuck on earth so you were in purgatory.

Justin:

Well, they were certainly holier.

Sydnee:

Really?

Justin:

Wakka wakka.

Sydnee:

Unacceptable.

Justin:

Fair enough.

Sydnee:

Unacceptable.

Justin:

That was my one. That was my only one, I'm sorry.

Sydnee:

That's the only one you get.

Justin:

I'm so sorry. Just one.

Sydnee:

There was... There was actually a group of monks that were, um, specifically founded for the care of people with leprosy, and also made up of people with leprosy called The Order of Saint Lazarus, in which you probably get that reference. You're a good, good little...

Justin:

Yeah, that's like a...

Sydnee:

Bible reader.

Justin:

That's like, a super popular one.

Sydnee:

Yeah?

Justin:

That's like, classic. That's one of the classics.

Sydnee:

So what happened to Lazarus, Justin, for those who don't know?

Justin:

He died.

Sydnee:

Uh-huh.

Justin:

Of leprosy?

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Uh, just died.

Sydnee:

Just died.

Justin:

He just died, [laughs] and he... Jesus brought him back.

Sydnee:

Right, so it would make sense that they would call it The Order of Saint Lazarus if they thought that people with leprosy were dead on earth.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So... Um, people who did stay in asylums, who weren't in, in colonies but in asylums, were usually separated by gender, um, in order to prevent children, uh, because the children of lepers, they were seen as a sin against God, unfortunately.

Um, like I said, this eventually happened in the US. The biggest was in Carville, Louisiana, and it was just known as... I forget what it was called, it was just known as Carville eventually. So I guess, "Gone to Carville" was probably a good euphemism for somebody with leprosy.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, remember we had, "Gone to Dwight" for somebody who was getting clean off alcohol?

Justin:

Gone to Dwight, yeah. [laughs]

Sydnee:

You're going to Carville if you've got leprosy. Um, and while in most parts of the world in the mid 1900s, with the invention of the drugs we use today for leprosy, a lot of these things stopped. There were leprosariums anymore. Um, and some parts of the world persisted. In Japan, there was one open until 2008.

Justin:

Wow.

Sydnee:

Which I think is pretty crazy.

Justin:

Yikes.

Sydnee:

And there are still possibly, I don't know. As of the last thing I read, possibly there is still a handful of people left in asylums all over the world with leprosy.

Justin:

Ugh.

Sydnee:

If anybody knows if that's true for sure, let me know, but I mean, that's, that... According to what I've read...

Justin:

If you're someone with leprosy and you're in an asylum, and you're listening to this podcast, first off, that's a pretty chill asylum. Congratulations, that's one of the good ones. You may just want to chill there. But, uh, if not, just send us an email, sawbones@maximumfun.org.

Sydnee:

I don't know if that's... If that's correct, but from what I've read, there may still be people treated that way.

Justin:

Yikes.

Sydnee:

Which of course, is not necessary today. We have treatments. We have a cure for leprosy.

Justin:

Oh, great.

Sydnee:

Um, the first modern treatment that was invented was called promin. Uh, it was quickly, uh, replaced with better drugs, uh, dapsone, clofazimine, rifampicin. Uh, those three are used in triple therapy today, much like tuberculosis. If anybody's familiar with it, we use multiple drugs to treat it, you don't just get one.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Leprosy's the same way. Um, so we use these medications today, uh, with great effectiveness. Um, leprosy is still around, which a lot of people don't know. Uh, there are probably... As of 2012, there were 180,000 cases, that was the prevalence. The incidence of leprosy— Do you know the difference?

Justin:

I do not.

Sydnee:

The incidence is how many cases we have each year.

Justin:

Oh, okay.

Sydnee:

The prevalence is how many cases total exist right now.

Justin:

Oh, right.

Sydnee:

So, incidence is tough with leprosy because it hangs around...

Justin:

Right. So it's hard to...

Sydnee:

...for so long.

Justin:

...tell exactly when it happened.

Sydnee:

Yeah, when it happened. Um, but it still exists, uh, mostly in India, Brazil, Nepal, Tanzania, Mozambique...

Justin:

Why can't we just treat everybody?

Sydnee:

Um, we can. We will.

Justin:

It seems like we could just wipe this thing out.

Sydnee:

Uh, you know, there— There are a lot of movements to do that, a lot of, um... A lot of organizations, uh, money and good people putting their time into trying to eradicate leprosy. I don't think it's, uh, an unrealistic goal.

I think with it being a primarily human disease, um, that makes it possible. That's why smallpox was easier to eradicate, because it was a human disease. So, I think it's a possibility. We've got good treatments. We've just still got work to do.

Justin:

If I need to wipe every armadillo off the face of this planet, so help me God, I'll do it.

Sydnee:

I think the armadillos would be low on my list. I'd start with treating all the people with leprosy, and remembering that, um, leprosy is just another illness that people unfortunately can get.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

And is no... Should be no more stigmatized than the common cold.

Justin:

So that's leprosy, Sydnee. I will take your word for it that I do not, uh, have it.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Do you believe me now?

Justin:

I do believe you, and I'm sorry that I doubted you and your medical acumen. It will... Well, it will. It will definitely happen again, but...

Sydnee:

I hope that I know the difference between leprosy and jelly. I do teach at a medical school and I'd probably lose my job if I didn't.

Justin:

You've never seen it, right? Leprosy?

Sydnee:

No. I've never seen leprosy.

Justin:

Um, if you do, let me know.

Sydnee:

If I do, um, trust me, I will. I'll probably write it up if I see a case of leprosy in Huntington.

Justin:

Okay. Good. Well, I'll look forward to reading...

Sydnee:

That would probably be worthy of a case report in a medical journal.

Justin:

I'll look forward to reading that report, and I look forward to reading your emails that you send to us at Sawbones@MaximumFun.org. You can, uh, suggest a show there. Did anybody suggest this episode, Syd, or is this from your mind's eye?

Sydnee:

Actually yes, Justin. Somebody did recommend this episode. Vanessa.

Justin:

Thank you, Vanessa. That was—

Sydnee:

So, thank you.

Justin:

Very kind of you. Uh, and please do email those, 'cause there a lot of these here to keep track of if you, uh... Rather than suggesting them on Twitter. But if you want to tweet about our show, you are certainly welcome to. We're @Sawbones, uh, and thank you people tweeting about our show like Ninja Glamour Makeup, Chris Willoughby, Dillona Sky, Max Sporks, Klecas, I guess, K-L-E-Cas, I don't know. Jay Butler, Alex Shaver, Jeremy D. Imson, Jay Butler, our friends over at, uh, Games By Playdate who are apparently working on a Sawbones themed game?

Sydnee:

Thank you Glen, Meg, and Diane.

Justin:

Thank you guys, um, that's very exciting. Make sure you listen to all the other shows on the Maximum Fun Network like Jordan, Jesse, Go!, Stop Podcasting Yourself, Judge John Hodgman, Wham Bam Pow, One Bad Mother...

Sydnee:

My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Justin:

Oh, thank you, Sydnee. I appreciate that. Uh, there's a ton of other shows over there. You can go discuss them all at MaximumFun.org and go to our forums, uh, or you can, uh, chat about our most recent episode. Thank you to the...

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

...Taxpayers, a band that makes the music that you hear at the beginning and end of our show.

Sydnee:

And so graciously allows us to use it.

Justin:

They are @TheTaxpayers on Twitter, so just follow them and buy all their music. And that's gonna do it for us. Make sure you join us again next Tuesday for another episode of Sawbones. Until then, I'm Justin McElroy.

Sydnee:

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

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

[theme music plays]

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