

## Sawbones Episode 78: Syphilis

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### **Justin:**

Hey, folks, uh, Justin McElroy here. Listen, just wanna warn you ahead of time; while, uh, this week's show will still be free of profanity as you've come to, uh, uh, expect from us, we do get into some, uh, uh, adult topics. So, uh, if you're listening with the kids, you might wanna make sure [laughs] that they're comfortable with that, I guess.

### **Sydnee:**

[laughs]

### **Justin:**

I don't know what your relationship is like with your kids.

### **Sydnee:**

I'd have that whole birds and the bees talk with them before listening to this episode, if I were you.

### **Justin:**

You go ahead and knock that out.

### **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 Medicines by The Taxpayers plays]

### **Justin:**

Hello, everybody, and welcome to *Sawbones: A Marital Tour of Misguided Medicine*. I am your cohost, Justin McElroy.

### **Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

Just finishing up her, uh, NatureBox Lemon Almond Biscotti bites.

**Sydnee:**

More about that later.

**Justin:**

More on that later.

**Sydnee:**

So, how are you today, Justin?

**Justin:**

I'm doing well. It's a nice early morning recording. We shipped, uh, the puddle off to your, uh, your in-laws, to hangout with.

**Sydnee:**

That is what we call our daughter.

**Justin:**

Oh. Yeah. Well, they know that. Uh, so we shipped her off to, uh, to learn, and grow, and eat some sweet potatoes, over there at Mimi and Pop's house. And now we're just... I'm ready to hear about some medical history, Sydnee.

**Sydnee:**

Well, I thought we could take a second to, like, talk and learn a little more about each other. You know, we don't get to talk-

**Justin:**

Yeah. I mean-

**Sydnee:**

... much these days.

**Justin:**

... I think when-

**Sydnee:**

You know?

**Justin:**

... when we're recording a podcast is a fine time to do that. What did you, uh, have in mind as a topic?

**Sydnee:**

I don't know, just, like, to learn more about, like, your likes and dislikes, and, like-

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... your favorite things.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Like, I mean, I know, like, your favorite food is cereal.

**Justin:**

You're right.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause you eat that a lot.

**Justin:**

Yep.

**Sydnee:**

But, like, I don't know other things. Like, what's- what's your favorite poem?

**Justin:**

Oh, wow. My favorite poem? Oh, man, uh, woo. I mean, I've got so many.

**Sydnee:**

Recite it from memory, immediately, please.

**Justin:**

Uh, immediately? Uh, favorite poem? Favorite poem? Um, [singing] ba da bop ba baa, I'm lovin' it.

**Sydnee:**

That's... The McDonald's jingle?

**Justin:**

[singing] Food, folks and fun...

**Sydnee:**

What's that from?

**Justin:**

Is that a poem?

**Sydnee:**

Is that another jingle?

**Justin:**

It... Um, my favorite poem...

**Sydnee:**

You got nothing, do you?

**Justin:**

... is... My fav- well, my favorite poem-

**Sydnee:**

Have you ever read a poem?

**Justin:**

Um, [singing] Riding... my pony...

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

[singing]

**Sydnee:**

I don't think that's appropriate-

**Justin:**

It's an equestrian poem.

**Sydnee:**

... for our podcast, and... I mean, I guess. So you- you're falling back on the songs are poetry kinda thing?

**Justin:**

Uh, yes.

**Sydnee:**

You went for, like, a jewel- a jewel-esque-

**Justin:**

I- I'll be honest-

**Sydnee:**

... prospective.

**Justin:**

... I don't know that much poetry. I had a couple poetry classes. I- I wrote... You know, in college, in- in- in keeping with law, uh, for somebody with a liberal art- arts degree, I wrote some bad poetry. But, um, I- I guess I like- like, I like E.E. Cummings.

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

Carry your heart with, carry it my heart. That's a good one.

**Sydnee:**

Oh, there you go. Okay.

**Justin:**

That's my favorite poem.

**Sydnee:**

Well, that-

**Justin:**

Yeah. That's my favorite poem. What's yours?

**Sydnee:**

Well, would you like me to recite it for you?

**Justin:**

Of course. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. So this is my favorite poem. Um, it's a little... I don't know. It's not everybody's taste, but, you know me.

**Justin:**

Hit- hit me.

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

You're gonna recite it from memory?

**Sydnee:**

Yes. Completely from memory.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Well, now- now you took it off the screen, so now I can't-

**Justin:**

Okay. Well, then-

**Sydnee:**

... now I can't-

**Justin:**

All right then.

**Sydnee:**

... now I can't pretend [laughs] to recite it from memory.

**Justin:**

Well, okay. Well, I just-

**Sydnee:**

That was a- that was a great trick.

**Justin:**

You put me on blast for my lack of, uh, my lack of knowledge about, uh, uh, poetry. So I just...

**Sydnee:**

Uh-huh. So, Justin wanted to take it away so I couldn't see it anymore, so there could be this great trick that it looked like I was... But it was a trick you were trying to play on our audience. And I don't appreciate that.

**Justin:**

It's an audience trick. Okay. Here we go. Sorry.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, so, anyway. From memory.

**Justin:**

From memory. [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

Uh, there was a young man from Black Bay, who thought syphilis just went away. He believed that the chancre was only a canker that healed in a week and a day. But now he has "acne vulgaris", or whatever they call it in Paris, on his skin it has spread from his feet to his head. And his friends want to know where his hair is.

There's more to his terrible plight. His pupils won't close in the light. His heart is cavorting. His wife is aborting. And he squints through his gun-barrel sight.

Arthralgia cuts into his slumber. His aorta is in need of a plumber. But now he has tabes and sabre-shinned babies, while of gummas, he has quite a number.

He has been treated in every known way. But his spirochetes grow day by day. He's developed paresis. Has long talks with Jesus. And thinks he's the Queen of the May.

**Justin:**

What is that about?

**Sydnee:**

Well, thank you, Theodor Rosebury, who wrote that lovely syphilis poem.

**Justin:**

A great-

**Sydnee:**

It's about syphilis! It's to remember all the symptoms of syphilis in a poem.

**Justin:**

Why- why has syphilis inspired a poem?

**Sydnee:**

You know, and, uh, syphilis has actually inspired quite a few poems-

**Justin:**

Really?

**Sydnee:**

... throughout the ages. Do you wanna- do you wanna know more about syphilis?

**Justin:**

I'd love to know more about syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

Well, let's talk about syphilis.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, a lot of our [laughs] listeners want us to talk about syphilis.

**Justin:**

Yeah. You guys are, like, hungry for syphilis chat.

**Sydnee:**



Which, I mean, that makes me worry. Like, it's really... Just to skip ahead... It's really easily treatable. Go see a doctor. Don't wait for our podcast.  
[laughs]

**Justin:**

"They gotta do this episode."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

"I'm dying over here."

**Sydnee:**

But, thank you to some of the people who have suggested it; Ruth, Aaron, Hannah, Anne, Dianne, Megan, Patricia, and Holly, and I'm sure many other people have suggested it. But syphilis is an old disease. The first outbreak we know about, the first one that was recorded. And I'll get into kind of... There's a lot more- there's a lot more question as to where it may have started before this. But the first recorded outbreak was in-

**Justin:**

A lot of theoretical syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] A lot of theoretical...

**Justin:**

Band name. I call it. Theoretical Syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] I don't- I don't know how many people are gonna wanna come see. I'm gonna go to...

**Justin:**

You're gonna come to the show anyway, 'cause you're supportive. And I appreciate that about you.

**Sydnee:**

Will you sing songs about syphilis?

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Oh.

**Justin:**

There's no [crosstalk 00:07:00] syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

Aw. Hmm. Anyway. 1494, some French troops invaded Naples, Italy. And, while they were there wreaking havoc, they, you know, started plundering the town, and, unfortunately, plundering the citizens. And there's this weird disease that started spreading.

**Justin:**

I bet it's syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Everybody started getting... And, uh, it was pretty apparent... You know, a lot of the time, we don't know how things spread. We talk about on our- on our show that people are like, "I don't know. It was a bad smell that spread the plague," something like that.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

It- people figured out pretty quickly that syphilis had something to do with sexual contact...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

.. because of where your symptoms start. And I'll get into describing, kind of, the course of syphilis. But- but it was pretty apparent, pretty quickly-

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

... like, "Oh..."

**Justin:**

The Course of Syphilis is another great title-

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... for anything.

**Sydnee:**

Um, so, people started getting sick, really sick, started dying, because syphilis back then was a little worse than syphilis now. Um, and this is when we first know that syphilis pops up in the historical record. Now, as far as where it came from before that, there's actually a lot of controversy over whether it was a disease that, when Columbus visited the Americas, that he brought back with him.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Because, I mean, you'll- you think about it, 1494, 1495, when the first big outbreak happens, not too long after... Do you remember when Columbus sails- sailed the ocean blue?

**Justin:**

Uh, I believe it was 1492.

**Sydnee:**

There you go. I was giving you a clue, 'cause it rhymes.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

This is a poetry episode.

**Justin:**

Oh, my God.

**Sydnee:**

Even more poetry.

**Justin:**

Oh my gosh.

**Sydnee:**

Um, so that- there's some question. We think it came from the Americas. We have some evidence that would support that. Other people are saying, "Well, maybe it existed in Europe before." There's some things the Hippocrates even wrote about that sound kind of like syphilis, so maybe it was- it was always in Europe. Uh, there's some related diseases that we find in- in Africa, but, uh, at the end of the day, our best evidence, at this point, is that... I don't- I don't know. Was this retribution for the small pox that Columbus' crew brought over?

**Justin:**

It's all... All's fair in love and war, Native Americans.

**Sydnee:**

So the-

**Justin:**

Sorry about that.

**Sydnee:**

They sent syphilis back over. [laughs]

**Justin:**

See, you- you did one, too. You did a bad...

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

You... See? [laughs] Maybe the tables have turned now.

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

Or maybe it's not... No.

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Doesn't make up for anything.

**Justin:**

No. It's not.

**Sydnee:**

No, it doesn't.

**Justin:**

It doesn't make up for anything.

**Sydnee:**

It doesn't.

**Justin:**

But- but... No, it doesn't. [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Uh, the... You know, we've talked a lot about poetry. The word syphilis actually comes from a poem. That's where we get the name of the disease syphilis. Prior to that, it had lots of other names. But- but the name syphilis came from a poem written by Girolamo Fracastoro, who was an Italian doctor, and, I guess, poet.

**Justin:**

Poet.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Or fancied himself-

**Justin:**

Am- amateur poet. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... quite the poet. And he wrote a poem about a man who was named Syphilis.

**Justin:**

[laughing] That is unfortunate.

**Sydnee:**

Well.

**Justin:**

That is a rough burden to bear, mon frere. Sorry about that.

**Sydnee:**

At the time, it wasn't called syphilis.

**Justin:**

He must've been `gized about this poem, though.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

[laughs] "Oh, cool. What is it? Oh. Oh. Excellent."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

[laughing] "Excellent. It's syphilis. Oh, the penis falling off thing."

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

"The syphilis-"

**Sydnee:**

No, no, no. That's not what happens.

**Justin:**

That's why you-

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

... can't... See, that's why you gotta do symptoms first.

**Sydnee:**

I will tell you... No. I will tell you the symptoms.

**Justin:**

I have nothing to work with.

**Sydnee:**

That is not what happens. [laughs]

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So, a man named Syphilis is given the disease by Apollo, as punishment. Because there was, like, a drought. And, uh, you know, Apollo was the Sun God, so he was blamed for it. And Syphilis was, like, cursing Apollo like, "I can't believe you brought us this drought," and Apollo was like, "Well, take this." [laughs]

**Justin:**

"Take this, Syphilis."

**Sydnee:**

"You wanna curse my name, you get this disease," which, henceforth, was known as syphilis.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Before it was called syphilis, it depended on where you were in Europe, or the world in general, as to what you would call it.

**Justin:**

Can I ask a question, as long as we're on this topic?

**Sydnee:**

Uh-huh.

**Justin:**

Is VD syphilis?

**Sydnee:**

VD actually stands for venereal disease...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

... which could reference any- any kind of sexually transmitted infection. It's kind of an outdated term. We actually don't-

**Justin:**

VD is like an out- outdated way of saying STD?

**Sydnee:**

Yes.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And, actually, more commonly now... And I don't know if this is everybody. But I tend to say STI, sexually transmitted infection.

**Justin:**

Hmm. What's the difference?

**Sydnee:**

I think- I think it's more of, um-

**Justin:**

So, in, like, one sentence, what's the difference between disease and infection?



**Sydnee:**

Well, I don't- I don't think it's so much the- the difference between the two, as the way that it sounds. I think it's more of, uh, disease sounds worse.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

You go- you get a sexually transmitted infection.

**Justin:**

I know that-

**Sydnee:**

A sexually transmitted disease sounds... I mean, it gets- it-

**Justin:**

I know that, when I catch chlamydia, all I can think is, "I just wish this was framed better-

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... from a linguistic point of view. That would really help this bitter pill go down a little smoother."

**Sydnee:**

Well, and it's also in- it's also not something that you necessarily have forever. There are sexually transmitted infections that you- that become chronic diseases. But then there are things like gonorrhea and chlamydia, which just go away-

**Justin:**

So we're just trying to make it sound nicer.

**Sydnee:**

... when you're treated. When you're treated. Yeah.

**Justin:**

Let's just call them pumpkin pie high fives.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

If we're gonna... Like, sure. That's a cool- that's...

"Hey, good news. You got a pumpkin pie high five."

**Sydnee:**

"Kids, wear a condom. Don't get a pumpkin pie high five."

**Justin:**

Yeah. Like, if we're gonna... Just, like, when it's-

**Sydnee:**

That's never gonna work. [laughs]

**Justin:**

That's never gonna work.

**Sydnee:**

They're all gonna want that.

**Justin:**

We're fired.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

[laughs] From whatever this imaginary job is.

**Sydnee:**

So, let's talk about what they called syphilis. So, if you were in Germany, you would have called, especially in the early 1500s, you would have called syphilis the French disease.

**Justin:**

[laughs] Nice.

**Sydnee:**

If you were in France, you would call it the Italian disease.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] If you were in Holland, you'd call it the Spanish disease.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

In Russia, you called it the Polish disease. In Turkey, it was the Christian disease. And in Tahiti, it was the British disease.

**Justin:**

Oh my gosh.

**Sydnee:**

And-

**Justin:**

Humans are the best.

**Sydnee:**

... I think there was some other countries thrown in from time to time that were blamed.

**Justin:**

That's so good.

**Sydnee:**

Um, but, generally, it was- it was probably whatever, like, colonist showed up.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

And then you got it, you were like, "Well, it's probably their fault."

**Justin:**

"They did it."

**Sydnee:**

It was also... We've talked a lot about small pox. This was also known as The Great Pox.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, because there are- there are some, like... I don't... They're not exactly pox-like lesions, but a rash that happens in the second stage of syphilis. Um, and they wanted to make sure that we were clarifying the difference between this and small pox.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

So it was called The Great Pox. It was also called Cupid's Disease, which I think you could piece together why.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and, I thought this was interesting, there was a- a name for the ulcers that it caused. Among British soldiers stationed in Portugal, they called it The Black Lion. [laughs]

**Justin:**

Whoa.

**Sydnee:**

It sounds, like, cool.

**Justin:**

It's heavy. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

And, in Scotland, they called it Grandgore.

**Justin:**

Grandgore.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Grandgore, which I like that name 'cause it's very gory. So, initially, syphilis starts spreading in Naples. And then it just takes off all over Europe. Uh, and anywhere that European explorers are going, they carry syphilis along with them, and spread it to the populace there. Uh, and like I said, it was- by the 1520s, it was well-established that this was sexually transmitted.

And so there were attempts already to stop it, you know, even not- not knowing what it is or, you know, anything about the- the organism that spreads it. Uh, there were attempts to stop it by closing down brothels, closing down public bath houses, or specifically saying like, "Well, we can have a bath house, but only for men here, and only for women here," like, no mixed bath houses. Um, they tried to regulate prostitution. Not stop it. [laughs]

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Just regulate it. Just, like, try to figure out if there were certain prostitutes that were... And this would be hard to do at the time, I would think. Like, who may be carrying syphilis, without any test for syphilis. That would've been very hard.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

And, you know, try to stop them from being prostitutes. Uh, for many, it was seen as a punishment for sin.

**Justin:**

Hmm. Okay.

**Sydnee:**

The Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, said that, you know, "This was- this was God's punishment because we've all been bad people, and that this is just gonna happen and everybody deal with it." And so there were some people who said, you know, "Whoever has syphilis, we should just kinda let them- let them go die."

**Justin:**

Well, that- that's a little much.

**Sydnee:**

"Because this is what God is doing to punish them." So there were some- there were some people who made no efforts whatsoever to treat or suppress syphilis, with the thought that, as long as they were good, kind of, moral person-

**Justin:**

Oh, man.

**Sydnee:**

... you wouldn't get it.

**Justin:**

That's a bummer.

**Sydnee:**

It had a lot of effect, um, on history. And we've talked about this with other diseases. The fashions of the time, uh, were altered, because women started wearing, like, a lot more makeup to hide the skin lesions.

**Justin:**

Ew.

**Sydnee:**

Like, big, thick, caked on makeup, and things, because it kind of marked you. It very much... There were distinctive lesions that syphilis causes on the skin. And, if you had them, then it wasn't just... You know, like small pox, it was, "Oh, no. You got small pox. I feel so- I feel so bad for you." This was, "Oh. You're one of *those* people. You got syphilis."

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and this also, actually, I- I saw this mentioned a couple places, it played a role in the history of the church because, if you were a member, specifically of the Catholic church, and you were supposed to be celibate-

**Justin:**

Oh. Sure. Right? Blow up your spot.

**Sydnee:**

... but- but then you had some disfigurements or lesions that were obviously from syphilis, then it began to question the- you know, the absolute holiness of some of the- the more prominent church figures from- from town to town. So. And, when we read... And I'm kind of already alluding to this... When you read the original descriptions of syphilis, it's really horrific.

They talk about giant abscesses, or, like, these giant ulcers that then turn into, like, these pockets of puss that eat away at your- your skin, and specifically on your face, and into your bones. Your nose would be completely destroyed by syphilis. We talked about this on the plastic surgery episode.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

That it specifically attacks the skin and the cartilage of your nose. So people would just basically not have a nose by the end. And, um, you- their skin would fall off. It was a really disfiguring, horrific, fatal disease. Um, this is not the course of syphilis now. This is not the way that we get syphilis now.

**Justin:**

So why do you think that that- that is? Do you think it's just, like, treating it repeatedly and... ? Or is it a completely different disease, or... ?

**Sydnee:**

No. It's not completely different. I think it's just changed overtime. And then, also, this was a population where there was zero immunity, so it just ravaged them.

**Justin:**

Hmm. Okay.

**Sydnee:**

You know, now we have a lot more people who have either had syphilis or been exposed to syphilis, or...

**Justin:**

We do?

**Sydnee:**

Well, we don't now, but we did as time went on.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And so the disease changed course. And then it mutates and...

**Justin:**

I was gonna say.

**Sydnee:**

So now...

**Justin:**

That's-

**Sydnee:**

Well, now we don't. I shouldn't say now.

**Justin:**

That's- the world is much different-

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Between-

**Justin:**

... than I thought it was, everybody's got secret syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

... 1494 and now-

**Justin:**

Okay. Got it.



**Sydnee:**

... a lot more people got syphilis.

**Justin:**

Got it. So, Syd-

**Sydnee:**

At one point, it was, like, a fifth of the world was infected with syphilis.

**Justin:**

Sydnee, what- what does syphilis do exactly?

**Sydnee:**

Okay. So nowadays, if you were to get syphilis, this would be the- the course of your illness. First, you get a chancre, which is an ulcer. It's painless, if you can believe that. But it's just a single ulcer, and it's somewhere in your, you know, your pri-

**Justin:**

Genitalia.

**Sydnee:**

... your private.

**Justin:**

You- you can use grown up words here.

**Sydnee:**

Your bathing- bathing suit.

**Justin:**

Bathing suit area. Okay. Got it.

**Sydnee:**

Your bathing suit area. And you just get one, and it's there for quite a while, like four to six weeks.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

And it goes away. So a lot of people... And- and some people don't have this. So this is why syphilis is missed a lot, is because you have just this one thing and then it goes away on its own, and it didn't hurt. And then you're fine.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Or you didn't get it at all. You didn't have that- that first chancre. Secondary syphilis comes later. Uh, at this point, you get the rash, that we're- that people were talking about a lot more when you read these old writings. You get, uh, some of it is just, like, red bumps on your groin, your hands, your feet. You can also get these raised plaques. So these, like, um... Does- does- do you understand what I'm saying, raised plaque?

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

Like, large, flat area of skin that's raised.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and it's called Condylomata lata. But anyway, the point is, there were these big skin- obvious skin lesions.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Big, giant, not just little red dots.

**Justin:**

I love you very much. You gave me my daughter. And I, um, and I do very much appreciate that. If I could just ask for myself, and probably a good portion of listeners, if you could just, like, sorta speed this section up a little bit?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

We're really lingering on all the chancres and oozing.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

If we can just kinda, like, beep, beep, beep, beep? Kinda hit these a little quicker for me.

**Sydnee:**

Okay... I just think this is the interesting part.

**Justin:**

Okay. And... go.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. So after two to six weeks, this goes away. And you may have a couple different courses of secondary syphilis. You may have a couple different, uh, times where you get the rash and then it goes away.

Then there's tertiary syphilis. Uh, this can happen anywhere from 2 years to 20 years after your initial infection. So this is a long-term thing. And this is for people who aren't treated. It can involve neurological symptoms. Uh, you can get dementia from it. You can get meningitis. You can get these destructive lesions all over your body and in your organs, called gummas. Uh, you can get an aneurysm of your aorta.

Um, there's all kinds of problems. Yeah. Arthritis's and arthralgias. Anyway. You can get really sick in tertiary syphilis. And that's what, in that poem when they talk about he thinks he's the Queen of the May, it's somebody that would get dementia, and maybe even go- what we would've thought of back in the time, is crazy, because of syphilis.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and you see- can see that with neuro syphilis at the end, people who are very altered as a result. And there's also, it's important to note, there's the- the, uh, the syndrome of congenital syphilis. So syphilis, especially in the secondary stage, can be passed on to the fetus.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

So, if a woman has syphilis while she's pregnant. And this used to be, especially in the 1500s, uh, a huge, huge problem. And babies can be born with all kinds of deformities, and- and internal organ diseases, and...

**Justin:**

So, Syd, with all the, like, the different ways that this can present, it seems like it would be kind of a bear to diagnose. How did- how did that- how did they do it?

**Sydnee:**

It absolutely was. And I'm gonna tell you about that. But, before we do that, why don't you head on down with me to the billing department?

**Justin:**

Let's go.

[ad break]

**Justin:**

So, how do we diagnose syphilis?

**Sydnee:**

So there was a lot of-

**Justin:**

Pretend that I paused an appropriate amount of time between dinner chat and syphilis chat. Just, uh, uh...

**Sydnee:**

Is there?

**Justin:**

Unless I edited in, like, 10 seconds of silence in there.

**Sydnee:**

Is there an appropriate amount of... Well, I don't know.

**Justin:**

There's no appropriate amount. Imagine if there was some music.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

Let me try again.

[singing]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] That's the music that you get after dinner, and before syphilis?

**Justin:**

[singing]

**Sydnee:**

That music has never led anyone from dinner to the activities that necessitate, you know, happen before you get syphilis.

**Justin:**

How do we diagnose syphilis, smart aleck? I'm gonna eat my Lemon Almond Biscotti bites, while you tell me how to diagnose syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

Don't crunch in the microphone. So there was a lot of confusion for a while about whether, uh, syphilis was its own disease, or if it was part of gonorrhea. And I think we talked about this as well, 'cause remember there was the one doctor who, in order to prove... We talked about this in the self-diagnosis section. And so in order to prove that syphilis and gonorrhea were different or the same, he couldn't- he didn't know. He took puss from a syphilis sore, and [laughs] he injected it into his own penis.

**Justin:**

Such a cool dude.

**Sydnee:**

And then he got syphilis and gonorrhea, because the person he got it from had syphilis and gonorrhea. And, anyway, so as a result, there was a lot of confusion for a long time. So people thought that you got gonorrhea first, and then later on, it would become syphilis. So it took many years for us to

figure out that, no, while they are both transmitted in the same fashion, these are definitely different, uh, diseases. And it wasn't until, like, 1838, that we actually figured this out. Uh, the doctor who wrote-

**Justin:**

[laughs] Whoa. Doctor Who was involved?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Doctor Who? No. Don't bring Doctor Who into this syphilis conversation. [laughs]

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Don't start spreading vicious rumors. That's... Well, that would make a lot more sense, though. How did syphilis get everywhere?

**Justin:**

[laughs] Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

All throughout history, and space, and the earth.

**Justin:**

There was a-

**Sydnee:**

Think about it. [laughs]

**Justin:**

There was a- there was a somewhat funny, uh, image going around, uh, back... I mean, uh, uh, sort of gallows humor. But, uh, back during the- when the Ebola outbreak was, uh, was- when we were treating doctors here for Ebola. There was a, uh, screen capture from Fox News or CNN or something, at the bottom. It said, "Doctor Who brought Ebola back [laughs] from Africa."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

And- and a bunch of people were sharing that like, "No. How could he?"  
[laughs] "Why would he do this to us?" [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] "He's supposed to be a good guy."

**Justin:**

"He's on our team."

**Sydnee:**

Uh, so the doctor who established it-

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

... was doctor Philippe Ricord. And he was the first one to describe the three stages of syphilis, and- and to note that this is a distinct disease. And at the time, it was still a clinical diagnosis. So you just kinda look for these three stages and go, "Eh. Okay. You probably have syphilis."

Um, the reward for being the first one to formally describe syphilis as it- as its own disease, is that the initial chancre forever forth became known as Ricord's chancre.

**Justin:**

Wow. What a- what an honor.

**Sydnee:**

So I don't know that he... I- in retrospect, he probably wishes he hadn't figured that out.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I think this is interesting, and anyone who is listening who's, like, in medical school, or who is a doctor, who's ever studied this stuff, is gonna like this, too. He worked under Doctor Dupuytren, who has a contracture named for him, Dupuytren's contracture. And his protege was doctor Fournier, of gangrene fame- Fournier Gangrene, so.

**Justin:**

I would-

**Sydnee:**

Which is a gangrene of the scrotum.

**Justin:**

I would literally rather listen to you describe symptoms of syphilis.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Well, anyway, I just- I thought it was cool. Uh, we know a lot more about syphilis and, like, the- the course of the illness, as far as what happens if you don't do anything to try to treat it from stage to stage, because of a really horrible study that was done. And a lot- and a lot of people have heard of this before.

The Tuskegee Study. So, between 1932 and 1972, the U.S Public Health Service did a study in Tuskegee, Alabama, where basically they recruited rural African American men, uh, and tested them to see if they had syphilis and then didn't really do anything. They would bring them in periodically and tell them that they were- they were taking care of them, that they were getting free medical care, but they didn't actually do anything to alter the course of their illness. They didn't treat them in any way. They didn't even tell them that they had syphilis. So- so the participants that came in that were positive for syphilis, they never let them know.

Um, and, initially, in 1932 when this was started, we didn't have a great treatment. But, in the '40s, when penicillin was introduced, we did. We had an excellent treatment for syphilis. And they still didn't offer this to any of the participants, or even tell them that they needed it.

Um, they even, uh, men who- who were registering for the draft during World War II, were tested for syphilis, and found positive. The U.S. Public Health Service, uh, attempted to intervene in these cases so that the military would not tell them that they were positive, so that they wouldn't then get treatment through the military.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, so they actively kept people from getting treated. So it was a- a really horrible dark period, I think, in our history. And a lot of men died from syphilis, and their- their wives got syphilis, and some of their children were born with congenital syphilis. So...



**Justin:**

Ugh.

**Sydnee:**

... um, so that's where, unfortunately, a lot of information as to what happens when you don't treat syphilis comes from, um, from this really, really awful, awful study. So, anyway, what treatments have we used overtime for syphilis?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Initially, we tried a lot of herbal treatments, as we did with everything.

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, wild-

**Justin:**

That's all we had.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. Wild pansy, something called Guaiacum, or- or holywood, which Guaiac is also used to test stool for blood. I didn't know that's where that came from.

**Justin:**

Huh.

**Sydnee:**

It's, like, an herb that we use for that. Um, this was not very effective, but this, you know, we didn't- we didn't know. We put it on- we put it on wounds and hoped they got better.

Mercury was the biggest treatment historically for syphilis. Uh, you could take it anyway you wanted to; you could eat it, you could inject it directly at the site, if you were so inclined.

Uh, there were a lot of salves, like, topical applications like, "Take this cream and rub it all over your syphilis." Um, or a lot of people like to kinda be fumigated with mercury.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

So, like, you would sit in a box.

**Justin:**

Do a lot of people like to be fumigated with mercury, Sydnee?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Well, back then they did.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

That's an odd phrasing.

**Sydnee:**

Sorry.

**Justin:**

"You know what I'd like?"

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

"What I'd like... is to be fumigated with mercury."

**Sydnee:**

If you had syphilis, you probably would 'cause you didn't know what else to do.

**Justin:**

"Oh. Oh, Daniel, we don't have time to be fumigated with mercury."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

"We only have the afternoon."

"But, Rebecca, I'd really like to be fumigated with mercury."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

"Sydnee says I'd like to be fumigated with mercury." [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

If you had syphilis.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Anyway. So you would sit in a box.

**Justin:**

"New craze sweeping the nation."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

"People liking being fumigated with mercury. Not being required to, or having to, they like it, says modern day doc."

**Sydnee:**

Are you good with your syphilis jokes?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Mercury jokes?

**Justin:**

That's all.

**Sydnee:**

Are you happy now?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

I'd *like* to move on [laughs] to something else.

**Sydnee:**

Just let me know.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

I'll keep- I'll keep educating-

**Justin:**

No, no, no, it's fine.

**Sydnee:**

... the public. Whenever- whenever you're done.

**Justin:**

Keep educating the public. I got these Lemon Biscotti bites. I'm good.

**Sydnee:**

So, anyway, you would sit in a bit with your sticking out of it, and then they would put some mercury in it and then heat it underneath. So, like, the idea was that you would kind of absorb the mercury gas. They didn't have any-

**Justin:**

Does it have a low- does- does mercury have a low, uh, temperature at which it changes to a gas? Like, just, like, it is... You know how it has a low temperature which it changes from-

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. No, it's a- it's a liquid most of the time.

**Justin:**

Like, the boiling point is low, I'm wondering. This is what I'm asking.

**Sydnee:**

You know, I don't know the temperature that it becomes a gas. But I do know that the- this is one of the most ineffective ways to deliver mercury.

**Justin:**

Hmm. Excellent.

**Sydnee:**

Is through the gas form. I don't know if that's because it doesn't become a gas or because it just isn't absorbed that way. Um, I'm sure somebody is- is looking this up right now.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, you would usually... If you were gonna use it, you'd usually just sit in a hot room near a fire and then rub mercury on your skin several times a day.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

And then sometimes you would put some arsenic on your skin, too, with the mercury, just to really, really get it in there. There were also drinks that were sold. There were chocolate drinks that were sold by street vendors, uh, that were laced with mercury. And the idea behind this, specifically, was so that a man could buy them and give them to his wife and children-

**Justin:**

That's not good.

**Sydnee:**

... without them knowing-

**Justin:**

That's not a good thing to do.

**Sydnee:**

... what he was doing. So you could treat your wife for syphilis, by saying, "Hey, honey. I have this lovely chocolate beverage for you." So.

**Justin:**

So.

**Sydnee:**

So, basically, anytime you try to give me anything with chocolate in it, I'm gonna now wonder.

**Justin:**

You may be a little suspicious.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, this led to the- the phrase, "A night with Venus, and a lifetime with Mercury."

**Justin:**

That's pretty clever.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Uh, Malaria was used to treat syphilis briefly.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Uh, the idea was that... And this was a common therapy that, if you could induce a high fever, you could kill some sort of disease that a person had.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Uh, Malaria was just, it induced really high fevers. And so that's why it was used. And especially after we had Quinine to cure Malaria, it was thought, "Well, this is an acceptable risk then, 'cause we can just give you syphilis- or you have syphilis, and we'll give you Malaria, and then you'll get better." Um, so, if you didn't wanna do that, you can just sit in, like, a steam room, which seems a little better to me.

There were surgeries, we already talked about, that could reconstruct your nose. And, again, we mentioned this in the plastic surgery episode. But this involved, like, sewing your arm to your face.

**Justin:**

Ugh.

**Sydnee:**

So that it still had the blood supply from your arm, the skin from your arm. And then you would leave it there until it kind of attached to your face and then disconnect it. That would be weeks.

And then there was a great treatment that came out, in 1908, called Salvarsan. This was actually the first thing that- that really did treat syphilis well. Uh, not that it was a perfect treatment by any stretch. It was also known as 606, which I think is very ominous.

**Justin:**

Yeah. That- that's threatening, I think.

**Sydnee:**

But that was just because it was the 6th in a series of six collections of compounds that were tested, or something.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm [affirmative].

**Sydnee:**

Um-

**Justin:**

Like formula 409?

**Sydnee:**

Sorta like that, yeah.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Uh, and this was... We found this just a few years after we finally isolated the cause of syphilis, uh, a bacteria called a spirochete, called *Treponema pallidum*. We had just figured that out. We started using Salvarsan, which was an organoarsenic compound, which means it's got arsenic in it. Uh, it did definitely kill the spirochetes. It had been thoroughly tested on rabbits.

**Justin:**

Ew.

**Sydnee:**

If that makes you feel better. And you had to take a series of mini injections. And it had a lot of toxic side effects, including liver damage, rashes, nausea, vomiting, and maybe you would die.

**Justin:**

Oh, man.

**Sydnee:**

So, not an ideal treatment.

**Justin:**

Nope.

**Sydnee:**

And then, in 1943, the world changed.

**Justin:**

What's up.

**Sydnee:**

Because we- we had penicillin.

**Justin:**

Yay, penicillin.

**Sydnee:**



And this is, like, the... This is the beginning of the end of a lot of infectious disease stories.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause then we had antibiotics. So, 1943, penicillin hits- hits the screen, and everybody starts using that for syphilis. And it is still, to this day, the best cure for syphilis. That's what we would give you if you came into the office today. We'd give you an injection of penicillin. So. Lot- lots of famous people had syphilis, by the way.

**Justin:**

Oh, yeah?

**Sydnee:**

Keats did, Toulouse-Lautrec, Manet, Al Capone. It's theorized that people like Napoleon, and maybe Van Gogh, maybe Hitler had syphilis.

**Justin:**

Oh.

**Sydnee:**

So. They pro- syphilis was probably another one of these diseases that had a lot more effect on the course of human history than we give it credit for. It's-

**Justin:**

Thank you to the Taxpayers for letting us use their song Medicines, at the, uh, the intro and outro of our program. Uh, we have a Facebook page. Search *Sawbones* on Facebook. There's a lot of people there, uh, discussing episodes, um, you can also find the, uh, the- the page for maximumfun.org, which is our podcast network. In fact, there was a, like, 30... [laughs] Did you see this, like, 30 response thread on the maximumfun.org Facebook page, about what the guy- uh, what the guy is saying at the beginning of our theme song?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] No.

**Justin:**

"This song is about the- the- the books."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

Whatever- whatever he is saying there. Uh, the- that seems to be the- the prevailing wisdom right now, is this song is about some books. But, um-

**Sydnee:**

Oh.

**Justin:**

Because, apparently, the song *Medicines* is, if you listen to the lyrics, it's about people who, uh, turn into books.

**Sydnee:**

No. I didn't know-

**Justin:**

Yeah. Like, track-

**Sydnee:**

... that's what it was about.

**Justin:**

... track that down.

**Sydnee:**

I thought it was about medicine.

**Justin:**

It's about everything.

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

Uh, but thank you to- to them. Uh, maximumfun.org is a podcast network. We are a part of it, uh, along with, uh, other shows, like, uh, *The Adventure Zone*, which is a D&D, uh, podcast that I do with my brothers and my dad.

Uh, *Bunker Buddies* is a new one that, uh, my brother Travis does with his friend Andy, and the two of them talk about how you can survive certain disaster scenarios. But it's a comedy show.

**Sydnee:**

You can also checkout *My Brother, My Brother and Me*-

**Justin:**

Aw.

**Sydnee:**

... where Justin and his brothers attempt to give you bad advice.

**Justin:**

Well, we successfully give bad advice.

**Sydnee:**

Oh, that's true.

**Justin:**

But the- but the-

**Sydnee:**

You attempt to give advice-

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

... and it's bad. [laughs]

**Justin:**

Succeed in giving bad advice.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

You can checkout all those shows, plus many, many more, at [maximumfun.org](http://maximumfun.org). Um, I think that's gonna do it for us, Syd. We're on Twitter, @Sawbones. She's @SydneeMcElroy. S-Y-D-N-E-E M-C-E-L-R-O-Y.

**Sydnee:**

And he's @JustinMcElroy, which is easier to spell.

**Justin:**

Until, uh, next Tuesday or Wednesday, uh, uh, whichever comes first. I'm Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

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

[theme music plays out]

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