

## **Sawbones 119: Green Sickness**

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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.

### **Justin:**

Hello everybody. Welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

### **Sydnee:**

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

### **Justin:**

Sydnee, I've been doing, uh, a lot of thinking about how I can contribute to the show more and to America.

### **Sydnee:**

It's about time.

### **Justin:**

Uh, and you know how you're a doctor?

### **Sydnee:**

Yes, I am aware of that fact.

### **Justin:**

And you know how by being married to you, I'm sort of a doctor.

### **Sydnee:**

No, that's not... I mean—

### **Justin:**

Honorary.

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

God.

**Sydnee:**

Not a thing.

**Justin:**

If you are listening to this and you have a university, please, I'll do anything to get an honorary doctorate.

**Sydnee:**

And you have a university? If you own a university—

**Justin:**

If you are a university and you're listening to this, whoa, those are some big headphones. Unless you're Phoenix Online, in which case, you're just plugged into the grid. Anyway, I'm going to, um, I'm gonna contribute more because I feel like you are sort of, like— So, you're a real doctor, right?

**Sydnee:**

Right. I'm—

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

I am a real doctor.

**Justin:**

So what I'm thinking is, I wanna be more of, like, a folk doctor. You know what I mean? Folk remedies, no..

**Sydnee:**

Like, oh, like... I thought you meant like a folksy like, you know—

**Justin:**

Well, like Patch Adams.

**Sydnee:**

"Hi, how're y'all doing?"

**Justin:**

Yeah, that's like a bumpkin Patch Adams. No. I wanna be like— You know how people say like their legs are hurting 'cause of their arthritis when it's about to rain or something. Like, I wanna do all...

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

... medical testing that way.

**Sydnee:**

Oh. So like, in order to diagnose arthritis you're just gonna wait 'til it rains...

**Justin:**

Rains and—

**Sydnee:**

... and then go door to door and ask people...

**Justin:**

"How are you feeling?"

**Sydnee:**

... if their knees hurt?

**Justin:**

Or if they say, "I think I have arthritis, doc." I'll say, "Let me check that forecast and we'll get you a diagnosis pronto.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

Like, I give a— Let me give you one right now, anemia. Okay?

**Sydnee:**

Okay.

**Justin:**

Uh, if you rub a gold ring on somebody's skin and it makes a black line, then they are anemic. There is one...

**Sydnee:**

Wow. That's—

**Justin:**

... another test for me to do.

**Sydnee:**

Um, no. That's actually not true. Um, but I mean, I will— I'll give you a little bit of a pass in that you're not... Uh, I think a lot of people think that. Um—

**Justin:**

Hm, well, how can it be true if I think it? How could it not be true if I'm, like, if I know—

**Sydnee:**

No, well—

**Justin:**

How would I know it, if it wasn't true? Hm.

**Sydnee:**

Where did you hear about that?

**Justin:**

Oh, gosh. You know, folk has been passed down.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly.

**Justin:**

Folk medicine, Sydnee, has been passed down from generations to generations.

**Sydnee:**

The thing about stuff that gets...

**Justin:**

Could have been my noni, my noni's noni, my noni's noni's noni. It's impossible to say.

**Sydnee:**

The thing about stuff that gets passed down generation to generation is that, as nice as that is, as comforting as that is, it doesn't necessarily make it true. It might be, but that one's not. That's not true.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, you're probably just reacting to the metal in the ring if you have a black line on your finger from a... It has nothing to do with— I mean, like, you know to diagnose anemia you need a blood test, right?

**Justin:**

Hm, well, uh, I guess...

**Sydnee:**

I mean, I can look at patients and sometimes say, like, "Hm, I see some signs that maybe they're anemic," but like I really need that blood test to be, you know...

**Justin:**

I agree to disagree.

**Sydnee:**

... sure.

**Justin:**

... but I think that's it's, um, probably for the best since I don't know what anemia is and I don't know how to treat it.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Well, uh, maybe we should back up a little bit.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Maybe we should talk about what, um, what anemia is, but maybe a little broader than that 'cause this is, uh, you know, this is Sawbones.

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

Right? This is a medical history podcast.

**Justin:**

Rough and raw.

**Sydnee:**

And we like to deal with...

**Justin:**

Real and ribbled.

**Sydnee:**

... the historical stuff that maybe sometimes is a little funnier. And so, why don't we talk about something called green sickness.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Okay?

**Justin:**

Like, Kermit had.

**Sydnee:**

Yes, like Kermit.

**Justin:**

And it wasn't easy folks [laughs] but he dealt with that struggle every day.

**Sydnee:**

You know what? I'm really glad, I knew that joke was gonna happen in this episode and I'm glad you got it out of the way right now.

**Justin:**

Joke is very liberal.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

You can be very, very loose with the term.

**Sydnee:**

So, we're gonna talk about green sickness. Thank you, Crystal, for recommending this topic. Uh, and as we've kind of alluded to, when we talk about green sickness, which is not a disease that exists anymore, like you won't find that in medical literature. It's not like you—

**Justin:**

We cured it. Congratulations...

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

... humanity!

**Sydnee:**

No, it's just—

**Justin:**

We eradicated it.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

Coming for you next, skinny worm.

**Sydnee:**

No— Uh, well, good, but no. Okay. It's not that we eradicated it, it's that it was another example of us kind of seeing some sort of syndrome in patients and tagging it with a name that had all kinds of connotations and all kinds of strange treatments, but really ended up probably being different diseases um, and having nothing to do with what we thought, you know, was originally causing it.

Uh, so for instance, green sickness largely would be what we think of as a hypochromic anemia today, which just means it's a kind of anemia where if you look at the red blood cells underneath a microscope, they look pale in the center. Hypochromic, less color.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Right?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So looked pale. And that's usually caused, the most common, by iron deficiency. Now, there are some other genetic disorders that can cause it, but for the most part we were probably dealing with iron deficiency. Now, again, since green sickness also encompassed some other things, we'll kind of get into that, but that's largely what we're gonna talk about is the anemia portion.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

It was also known as chlorosis...

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... which comes from the root for green.

**Justin:**

Oh, like chlorophyll?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. And, uh, also called the pale or white sickness because uh, the general idea is that people who had it would be very pale, right? Would be— Would have a very pale complexion 'cause most of them were anemic, uh, and they may even appear a little green-tinged because they were so pale, was— That's where the name comes from.

**Justin:**

Now, did we have an understanding of what anemia was at this point?

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

No. Um, we really, uh... When you go back, you can see, like, Hippocrates and Galen making some references to something that may have been anemia to, you know, people who— Uh, especially women.

This is— Green sickness was largely a disorder of women. Um, not that men couldn't get anemia, but it was just, it tended to be associated with females. And there was an association with women around the age that they started menstruating, that they might get green sickness.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Which is not, like, crazy thought because...

**Justin:**

You do lose iron during your period.

**Sydnee:**

Right, when you start having periods, you may— Some women do suffer from some iron deficiency anemia as a result.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... so that's not, like, a crazy association. Um, but we're not— We don't really see anybody, you know, knowing that it has to do necessarily with blood loss. Um, and we really don't see it defined as a disease until the 1500's.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and like I said, it was mainly seen as a disease of young women. Uh, it was— Although it happened about the time that they started menstruating, it really wasn't associated with their periods as much as the fact that they were still virgins.

**Justin:**

Oh, okay.

**Sydnee:**

So, it was thought to have something to do with the fact that these were women who were now officially of child bearing age...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... because they started their periods, but they had not yet gotten married.

**Justin:**

Got it. Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So, it was also sometimes called the virgin's disease.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, also lover's fever. Sometimes you see...

**Justin:**

I like that one.

**Sydnee:**

... [laughs], green sickness kind of associated with the idea of love sickness.

**Justin:**

Sounds like a 1960's screwball comedy starring Tony Curtis. I'm into it.

**Sydnee:**

What?

**Justin:**

Lover's fever.

**Sydnee:**

Lover's fever? [laughs].

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um—

**Justin:**

Coming to movie screens this summer, a sizzling new adventure. Tony Curtis, Judy Garland.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. About anemia?

**Justin:**

The streets are hot. [laughs].

**Sydnee:**

And Judy Garland is very tired and a little short of breath...

**Justin:**

Tempers are—

**Sydnee:**

... and quite pale. [laughs].

**Justin:**

Tempers are high, iron count's low.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. Um, it was also described as... the term for it was the disease of maids occasioned by celibacy.

**Justin:**

Not very catchy.

**Sydnee:**

No. But I like the idea that you're occasioned by celibacy.

**Justin:**

Oh, hello.

**Sydnee:**

It's just kind of—

**Justin:**

Just happened this way, I don't know.

**Sydnee:**

Just happened.

**Justin:**

Didn't plan— Didn't set out to be celibate, just didn't do it. I don't know. Had opportunities.

**Sydnee:**

Um, Shakespeare wrote a lot about green sickness. Referring to women as being green or sick and green, or those kinds of references. And uh, it was used as a way to describe a women who may have been, what they also

would have called, lovesick. Lovesickness was thought to be a disease process as well.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. Accurate.

**Sydnee:**

And it was the sickness you get when you're in love with somebody.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, the only difference is with green sickness, you didn't necessarily have to be in love with one person. It was just basically, you had it 'cause you weren't getting any and so...

**Justin:**

Got it.

**Sydnee:**

... so it didn't matter. Like, you didn't need a specific person...

**Justin:**

I got it.

**Sydnee:**

... to fix the problem.

**Justin:**

Okay. Got it.

**Sydnee:**

Um—

**Justin:**

Any person.

**Sydnee:**

And you see that association. Like, sometimes you would get— You see, like, Shakespeare references this and other writers, that anybody who's kind of squeamish about sex, maybe they're just— They've got green sickness.

**Justin:**

They got the green sickness. Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I mean, that's a very, very... Yeah. [crosstalk]

**Justin:**

So it's kind of like some, uh... It's kind of like um, I don't know if, like, effeminate connotations would be the word, but, like, weak-willed or weak-spirited, like, sort of connotations to it, right?

**Sydnee:**

Yes.

**Justin:**

Like, not just women but there's a...

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

... there's an implication that, like, you don't have a strong stomach or something like that, right?

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. People... So uh, people who had green sickness were thought to be uh, kind of weak and puny. Um, it was the syndrome you would diagnose in a woman who, you know, like we kind of talked about, was of that age and a virgin and whatnot, maybe sexually squeamish or whatever.

Um, but they also were usually pale, tired, short of breath, pretty weak, uh, they might have headaches, they might just in general have an upset

stomach and not eat very much. So yeah, exactly. The connotation of green sickness is that you're not full of, like, life and vitality and...

**Justin:**

I got you.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and of course, uh, what goes along with this is the inherent, I mean, sexism in it.

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

The idea that women who are of child bearing age who have not yet, you know, become sexually active are somehow sick.

**Justin:**

Diseased.

**Sydnee:**

Yes, that that you have a disease and that you need a man to cure it.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So...

**Justin:**

Yeah, I can see some... Yeah, you know, now that you put it that way...

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

... I can definitely see a problem or two with that, just from a kind of overarching point of view.

**Sydnee:**

And you could be diagnosed with this just for being, like, a young woman who's kind of grouchy.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

They'd go, like, "Wow, I mean, obviously she's got green sickness and, you know, we know the cure for that."

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

"Get married."

**Justin:**

Get married, lady.

**Sydnee:**

Um—

**Justin:**

Like, so, like, spin— Like how we used to call people spinsters which is not a thing, anything.

**Sydnee:**

Right.

**Justin:**

Like, we don't call people spinsters anymore. Like, definitely...

**Sydnee:**

Like, the one thing, like on a side note, that's the one problem I have...  
[crosstalk]

**Justin:**

You're gonna talk about uh, It's a Wonderful Life, aren't you? Okay.

**Sydnee:**

... It's a Wonderful Life, which is one of my favorite movies of all time. And I'm not saying it's not, it's just that the absolute worst thing that he finds about his life when he, you know, when he goes to the alternative universe where he's never been born, the absolute worst thing that happens is poor Mary, his wife, is now uh, an old spinster who works in the library.

**Justin:**

An old spinster...

**Sydnee:**

Like, that's the worst.

**Justin:**

An old spinster, and, like, let's be clear, Donna Reed looks terrific.

**Sydnee:**

Yes.

**Justin:**

She's probably 33 years old.

**Sydnee:**

I mean—

**Justin:**

It's absolutely madness. "She'll never find love." What are you talking about? It's Donna Reed, she's in her mid 30's, James. Maybe just relax a little bit, dude.

**Sydnee:**

She's— And she's gorgeous. No, I mean, they did put the glasses on her...

**Justin:**

Oh, so it's like, yeah...

**Sydnee:**

... which is like a universal sign...

**Justin:**

It's like she—

**Sydnee:**

... for like, "Oh, ugh..."

**Justin:**

She's got She's All That-itis.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly.

**Justin:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

She's got the glasses on.

**Justin:**

"I don't know what you're so upset there, Jimmy, maybe, uh, take the glasses off and, you know, muss her hair up a little bit. Who knows?"  
Thanks, Clarence. You're not helping.

**Sydnee:**

That is the only problem I have with the movie. That's the only problem I have. Um, so back to— Should we talk about green sickness again...

**Justin:**

Yeah, sure.

**Sydnee:**

... or do you wanna talk about It's a Wonderful Life?

**Justin:**

No, no, please, green sickness.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, so in 1554, Johannes Lang, who was a German doctor, described green sickness and that's where we see, like, the first really good description of what this is and kind of, like, from a medical standpoint, although it really isn't a thing. At the time, from a medical standpoint. Um, he describes it, he notes that it's a virgin problem and, as such, we see our first big treatment recommendation which is, you know, get pregnant.

**Justin:**

Gross.

**Sydnee:**

And then it'll, you know, everything will be okay.

**Justin:**

I don't mean to say pregnancy's gross...

**Sydnee:**

Or in general— No.

**Justin:**

... I mean like it's gross that that would be a...

**Sydnee:**

Or—

**Justin:**

... a prescription.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. It was thought even just having sex, even if you didn't get pregnant, would fix it too.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So, just don't be a virgin or get pregnant and that would be the best thing. Now, to be fair, I will say that, like, if you are having periods and you're losing a lot of iron then you stop having periods, you...

**Justin:**

So they were right. You heard it here first folks.

**Sydnee:**

No. [laughs]. But you could also get anemic in pregnancy so...

**Justin:**

Local doctor sides with old timey dudes.

**Sydnee:**

Ah, no. But anyway, that was what they thought a remedy for green sickness was. And there's a horrible poem that I refuse to reference anything other than that it's called A Remedy for the Green Sickness, and if you are somebody who wants to read awful, sexist poems from, you know, the 1500's...

**Justin:**

You know that's my jam.

**Sydnee:**

... go check that out. [laughs]. Um, it's also suggested that this may be the result of poisoning. That somehow a woman— Like, she's poisoned herself.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and a lot of this was thought to be related to, like, a build up of blood and stuff within the uterus...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... because you're menstruating so now we know that's coming out of you, so we know that it's hanging out in there somewhere.

**Justin:**

I mean, they're just guessing.

**Sydnee:**

Right. They're just guessing.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

And so, maybe that's poisoning you. And so, it was, uh, advised to use something called mithridate. So, mithridate was an anti-poisoning mixture...

**Justin:**

Was a mispronunciation of mystery date.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. Mithridate.

**Justin:**

Mithery Date.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. Mithridate was an—

**Justin:**

Mithery Date.

**Sydnee:**

Is this something...? I feel like this is something...

**Justin:**

That's my favorite board game.

**Sydnee:**

... that would have shown up in one of your, like, those games that you play where you're like wizard and stuff?

**Justin:**

[holds in laughter] Mmm, yeah?

**Sydnee:**

Has mithridate ever shown up?

**Justin:**

You mean like a video game or like—?

**Sydnee:**

Like a video game, like, when you— Like, have you ever heard of this? I feel like this is something that should show up in one of your games.

**Justin:**

No.

**Sydnee:**

It was a— It's a— Like, it was a very popular concoction that you used for any kind of poisoning. So it was used, like, across many, many years and there are many different—

**Justin:**

I'm sure it has been, someone will tweet at me. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

And, uh, and it could have—

**Justin:**

I don't read that stuff, I just like hitting people with swords.

**Sydnee:**

It had varying ingredients, up to 65, and it depended on which source you read. And it included all kinds of things, from just like cinnamon and saffron and rhubarb to, like, both myrrh and frankincense were in there, um, turpentine, uh, parsley, just all kinds of stuff was in this.

Um, you pound that all up and take it with some honey, about the size of an almond, and it was thought to cure pretty much any poisoning that could happen.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

Um, this is such a crazy cure that even Pliny thought it was kind of nuts. And this seems right up his alley, right? Like, it's got a ton of ingredients, it makes no sense. Um, but let me tell you what Pliny thought about it.

Pliny said, "The mithridatic antidote is composed of 54 ingredients, no two of them having the same weight, while some of it is prescribed one sixtieth part of one denarius. Which of the gods, in the name of truth, fixed these absurd proportions? No human brain could have been sharp enough. It is plainly a showy parade of the art and a colossal boast of science."

**Justin:**

That is so prophetic of Pliny.

**Sydnee:**

Even Pliny knew.

**Justin:**

Pliny saw the whole thing.

**Sydnee:**

So, Pliny got— Our old buddy, Pliny the Elder, got this one right. So in 1681, uh, Sydenham, who had a lot to say about a lot of stuff, classified green sickness as one of the hysterical diseases.

**Justin:**

Fake.

**Sydnee:**

Right. And it— Well, I mean, at the time, that's not what he meant. Um, but it was, I mean, he...

**Justin:**

It's a useful classification though.

**Sydnee:**

Yes, it means fake stuff that only happened to women.

**Justin:**

[laughs].

**Sydnee:**

Um, uh, and he— Now, to be fair, he did advise iron for it. Uh, the theory was that iron would— it'd kind of invigorate you and wake up your libido.

**Justin:**

Ooh.

**Sydnee:**

Um, but I mean, I don't know about, that but it is good for anemia. In general at this period, uh, the two culprits behind green sickness were thought to be laziness and then, of course again, love is still a theme.

So, you could just give everybody a job and keep them really busy and that would prevent it. Um, and we see like this common theme of, that it has to do with fear of sex or sexual repression or something like that and that continues, you know, that was initially associated with it and that has not gone away.

And so, we see, like, this repeated theme of like green sickness and love sickness and women can get sad and mad and desperate to be married and

that they desperately need to no longer be virgins and, um, you know, a lot of associations with stuff that just seems really convenient for...

**Justin:**

For men.

**Sydnee:**

...men.

**Justin:**

Sorry again, about all... about everything, ladies.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, in the 1700's, the theory behind green sickness was mainly that when women started to menstruate, their humors would build up in their uterus, um, kind of, and get stuck there and they would be obstructed and it would make them very sick. Um, they also had this suggestion that it's either that or it probably has to do with masturbation.

Um, either way, uh, there were some interesting case studies that came out of that time period where they talked about women who had green sickness, and one symptom of green sickness was even though they didn't like to eat a lot of food, they would wanna eat something like chalk or cinders or dirt.

**Justin:**

Like with pica?

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. So they were really describing pica, which is associated with iron deficiency anemia. Again, they didn't know that, they just thought, "Oh, they've got green sickness, they're going crazy, and now they wanna eat dirt."

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and then there was also this idea from the time period that it had to do with some sort of blockage of your spleen. But again, the spleen was blamed for all kinds of crazy stuff back then.

**Justin:**

I know. I feel bad for the spleen. It got a bad rap and then everybody just got rid of it.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

Nobody even knows what it's for.

**Sydnee:**

Well, I mean, I do, but we'll talk about that in another episode.

**Justin:**

I don't believe you. I mean, I don't believe you, we'll talk about it, but I triple don't believe you don't need it for anything. Like, it's—

**Sydnee:**

No, you need your spleen. You absolutely... Okay.

**Justin:**

There's no way you need your spleen!

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Yes, you— Okay.

**Justin:**

Have— Uh, do people have their—

**Sydnee:**

You absolutely need your spleen.

**Justin:**

Do people have their spleens removed?

**Sydnee:**

Yes, sometimes.

**Justin:**

Your honor, the defense rests.

**Sydnee:**

But there are problems from that...

**Justin:**

Grinder rests, your honor.

**Sydnee:**

... and you need your spleen. Okay. We're not gonna talk about a spleen anymore, we're gonna go to the billing department.

**Justin:**

Let's go!

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

**Justin:**

So Sydney, you were telling me about uh, green sickness before the break and I wanna know more.

**Sydnee:**

So, uh, that's right, Justin. We were talking about green sickness, and as we move throughout the 1800's, um, we see a theme of one treatment in particular, um, of iron. Which makes a lot of sense if...

**Justin:**

'Cause you're iron deficient, it's the perfect treatment.

**Sydnee:**

Right, because anemia.

**Justin:**

100% magic bullet.

**Sydnee:**

Um, and you even actually see a French writer during the time period, uh, Auguste Saint-Arroman, write a recipe for people who have green sickness, uh, for a chocolate you could make them that included, like, iron filings in the chocolate. [laughs]

**Justin:**

Iron chocolate. Rock 'n' roll.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, so, you know, we don't understand why this is helpful, we don't even understand what we're doing with it, but we do see that iron is a common theme.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Now, the only thing that makes it a little tricky is, uh, 'cause I mean, usually we stumble upon this stuff by accident, right? We didn't know green sickness was anemia, turns out it is. We gave people iron, they got better so we kind of figured it out accidentally?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, but uh, the weird thing about green sickness is that while definitely a lot of cases were probably actually just anemia, iron deficiency anemia, uh, some other weird things may have been thrown in there which led to a lot of odd treatments. For instance, sometimes uh, women would claim that, and

this is one thought, sometimes it would be reported that green sickness could cause you to stop having periods.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Which doesn't make sense, right, if we're tying it to anemia?

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause you'd think more periods would make you more anemic. So, there is some thought that sometimes women would claim green sickness when they were actually pregnant.

**Justin:**

Oh, as, like, a cover up?

**Sydnee:**

As, like, a cover up and as also a way to be able to go to, you know, like, a pharmacist or somebody who had medicines that might help start periods and maybe if there was a pregnancy that was unwanted and they didn't want anybody to know about, they were seeking treatment for that.

**Justin:**

Got it.

**Sydnee:**

So there's some thought that that was maybe some cases of green sickness. There's also some thought that maybe sometimes— Because it— When you see that lack of period, that doesn't really make sense for anemia, so sometimes it may have actually been, um, the condition of anorexia nervosa.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So this may have actually been a psychiatric condition.

**Justin:**

So their iron was low because they weren't eating enough?

**Sydnee:**

'Cause they weren't eating, 'cause it was a nutritional issue...

**Justin:**

Oh.

**Sydnee:**

... um, which is why you would have anemia and not be having periods. You wouldn't be losing blood.

**Justin:**

Hm, yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, but— So you see all kinds of different, strange treatments because we really don't know exactly what we're treating or what this entity is or, you know, like, most of these things, it's multiple different things.

So, in addition to iron, we see, uh, throughout the 1800's, um, steel filings, uh, you could powder them also and then boil them in white wine and add some spices and some sugar and...

**Justin:**

Delicious. Yeah, I'm into it.

**Sydnee:**

It's like mulled wine, only with metal.

**Justin:**

I guess? Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

And it fixes your green sickness?

**Sydnee:**

Sort of.

**Justin:**

Which regular wine does not.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, frequent exercise was a common treatment? It's, like, you're tired and you don't have any blood— Well, we don't know that, but you don't have—

**Justin:**

I mean, that was pretty forward looking, like...

**Sydnee:**

So just exercise?

**Justin:**

It is a good way to get more energy.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, but if you're anemic, that won't fix it.

**Justin:**

Right. Yeah, sure.

**Sydnee:**

The problem is not that you're... Uh, you know that anemia isn't laziness, right? [laughs].

**Justin:**

It's laziness in obtaining and consuming iron, though. And people were telling you...

**Sydnee:**

Well—

**Justin:**

"...Hey, can you go to the iron store and buy some iron and just slam it?"  
You're like...

**Sydnee:**

"Ugh, I don't feel like it."

**Justin:**

"...Yeah, I'll get there later. I don't wanna."

**Sydnee:**

No, that's not what that means. Um, another recipe uh, that I found from the time period, is that you could take half a quarter of an ounce of pearl in powder, an ounce of powder of steel, cloves, mace, nutmeg and each half a quarter of an ounce of all those things and then you dry them and you make it into a powder and you sift it and then you take a pound of sugar and beat it and sift it again.

And then, chop this all up with a knife and then take as much of that as you can fit on a sixpence and eat it morning and afternoon at 4 o'clock and exercise while you do it.

**Justin:**

And do what?

**Sydnee:**

I don't know. I don't even know. Like, by the time you're done with this, you don't even care if you're anemic, right?

**Justin:**

I guess.

**Sydnee:**

It's like, whatever. I'm just exhausted from this treatment. You feel better... You do that for a couple days and then you're like, "Forget it. I'm gonna stop doing it." And then you have so much free time and energy.

**Justin:**

Yeah, I feel great.

**Sydnee:**

They don't have to do that anymore. Um, bloodletting, of course, was a common treatment for everything so why not also for, what turned out to be, anemia?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Oops.

**Justin:**

I wonder how good it is to, like, treat a fake disease with a fake uh, treatment. Like, if the two cancel each other out at some point.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

Placebo effect. That's not what that means, but maybe.

**Sydnee:**

No. Well, I don't think in this case, since these people are anemic and, like, you're bleeding them.

**Justin:**

That's true. That's fair.

**Sydnee:**

Um, another treatment that I saw that were tepid baths. Which, I mean, it's not gonna hurt anything.

**Justin:**

That seems like it would chill you out more. It seems like to get that energy that you crave, you wanna jump into, like, an ice cold bath.

**Sydnee:**

Well, but— Okay, again, this is anemia so, like, we're not— You can't, like, just will it away.

**Justin:**

Oh.

**Sydnee:**

You can't, like, take a cold shower and get over your anemia.

**Justin:**

Like, I know Sydnee, I'm not suggesting it!

**Sydnee:**

You're acting like everybody with anemia is just really lazy.

**Justin:**

No, I'm saying for the time period. I'm not, like, sitting here saying, like, "Here are Justin's 2016 methods for curing anemia that really definitely work. Take it from him, he knows what anemia is."

**Sydnee:**

No. Uh, well, I mean, I told you and seem to have already forgotten, so...

**Justin:**

It's when you're just tired and you don't have enough iron.

**Sydnee:**

Sort of. It's— You don't have—

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Your hemoglobin's low. The oxygen carrying capacity...

**Justin:**

He's so smart.

**Sydnee:**

... of your blood. Okay, do you know what hemoglobin is? It carries oxygen to your cells.

**Justin:**

Yes.

**Sydnee:**

Like, I explained this to you, right?

**Justin:**

It's the sticky part of blood, not the...

**Sydnee:**

No, what?

**Justin:**

... wet part, but the sticky part.

**Sydnee:**

No. It carries oxygen to all your cells in your body and so you need enough of it to do that. And if you don't have enough, you're not getting oxygen.

**Justin:**

It's blue usually, right?

**Sydnee:**

Okay, forget it. Some other treatments, uh, to go along with Justin's fake theories, um, iodine, ergot, uh, aloe, mercury, were all used. Um, riding a horse was recommended?

**Justin:**

Uh, okay.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, jumping rope?

**Justin:**

'Cause it's majestic and, like, it's good for everything.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, just because it— Somebody was just like, "I like riding horses. Ride a horse?"

**Justin:**

Yeah, "Maybe that'll help."

**Sydnee:**

Sure. Uh, jump rope. Um, wear some flannel underwear?

**Justin:**

No, I don't wanna do any of these things.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, brisk rubbing with a coarse towel?

**Justin:**

What? No, thank you. I would prefer not.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. Um, eat tender meat.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Or, apply friction over the loins and abdomen.

**Justin:**

And like— Of the woman?

**Sydnee:**

Well, of the patient but, yeah, most of the patients were— It was mostly diagnosed among women.

**Justin:**

That's so unpleasant. That's like such an unpleasant way to spend your time.

**Sydnee:**

Well, yeah. I mean, well it— Okay, which of the— Was it the mercury that you thought was really pleasant or the brisk rubbing with a coarse towel?

**Justin:**

That one actually bugs me the most. I think it seems very intentional and personal. I don't like that.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, malt liquor was a recommended treatment.

**Justin:**

Now we're back. Welcome story.

**Sydnee:**

Which, you're gonna need some malt liquor after all of that...

**Justin:**

You had my interest and now you have my attention.

**Sydnee:**

... after all of that brisk rubbing and friction over your loins and then jumping rope and eating mercury and iodine. I think the least you could do is offer somebody some malt liquor after that regimen.

**Justin:**

Yeah, you've earned it. Take a ride on the hurricane.

**Sydnee:**

And just to top it off, why not some laxatives?

**Justin:**

Well, no. I'd rather not. I wanna start with the hurricane thank you.

**Sydnee:**

Um, warm barley water was really common, especially just add some wine in that and then put your feet in a warm bath. Which, uh, I mean, that— I mean—

**Justin:**

Nobody knows—

**Sydnee:**

Like, that sounds relaxing.

**Justin:**

Yeah, I mean, like, that's not gonna— It's not gonna hurt, I guess. It will chill you out about the fact that you have this fake disease.

**Sydnee:**

And it's certainly better than one of the, um, more radical options for treatment that I found for green sickness, which was quit school.

**Justin:**

Ah. [laughs]. Applicable to women only. Come on, ladies.

**Sydnee:**

Yes, just quit school. It's just that it's putting such a strain on your poor little woman brain...

**Justin:**

On your whole thing. Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

... you know, to be in school-

**Justin:**

You're not ready for the challenge.

**Sydnee:**

See, the strain on your brain is making you, like, anemic. It's all the iron that you need to think...

**Justin:**

It's very complicated.

**Sydnee:**

... so, you wouldn't understand. Just...

**Justin:**

A man would understand. You don't understand.

**Sydnee:**

... leave it to us men. Go get in a tepid bath, eat some aloe or mercury. We don't know the difference.

**Justin:**

[laughs]. No, I don't think eating aloe is on the agenda.

**Sydnee:**

If you could ride a horse while you're— Uh, wear some flannel underwear. I'll be over later to briskly rub you with a coarse towel. It'll be okay. Here's your malt liquor and your laxative. Just go home and stop...

**Justin:**

Have a good Tuesday.

**Sydnee:**

... stop studying math. We know you don't get it anyway.

**Justin:**

Here's your hurricane ex-lax, please enjoy yourself.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]. Um, so uh, there were thought to be actually outbreaks of this, what they sometimes would refer to as a special women's anemia. Which, at least it's special, right?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Like, thanks guys. You're gonna give us an anemia that's special.

**Justin:**

Anemia, all your own, ladies.

**Sydnee:**

It's very special, special lady anemia. Just for us.

**Justin:**

Come visit this anemia whenever you want.

**Sydnee:**

Thanks. Uh, but they thought there were outbreaks of it in boarding schools. And so, that was often what they would just recommend is like, "Oh no, we've had another outbreak of green sickness and this just happens when you get all these girls together. So, just tell them all to quit school."

**Justin:**

And uh, what was the other? Drink barley wine.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, barley water and wine.

**Justin:**

And take a nice bath. Just relax, ladies.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. And just, like, you know, stop wearing yourself—

**Justin:**

Stop learning. That's the key thing.

**Sydnee:**

We finally— By the late 1800's, we start to tie, like, the symptoms of what we call green sickness, for the most part, to anemia. And then, like I said, not every woman who was every diagnosed with green sickness was anemic. I mean, likely it's, you know, we've— I've compared it to hysteria several times and that hysteria was a fake disease. I mean, it wasn't a real thing.

Um, it encompassed probably a lot of different medical issues. And I think green sickness also was different things, although the majority of cases, I think it would be— It would be fair to argue that they were probably related to anemia. Um, and we figure that out in the late 1800's.

It isn't until 1936 that we finally identify, for sure, like green sickness is not a thing, take that out of the medical books. Like, the term, you know, is disregarded at this point, and we start to call, you know, patients with this disorder, iron deficiency anemia. And that's also when it kind of stops being, like, a woman's disease.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

You know, because I mean, anybody can be iron deficient.

**Justin:**

Does it— Is it— Uh, this is slightly off topic, but is it nutritional?

**Sydnee:**

Iron deficiency?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Um, it depends. It could be, um, and certainly we do supplement people with iron. It could be due to blood loss, actually. Like, slow, chronic blood loss, um, and just you're not...

**Justin:**

Got a hole somewhere you don't know about.

**Sydnee:**

... you don't have enough— You're not replacing those stores enough, you know, fast enough because you're... Well, I mean, you'll have a— Well, yeah, you have a hole, you're leaking. [laughs]. No, you'd probably know— [crosstalk] Hopefully you would notice that. It's usually lost through the GI tract.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Um, or in women, periods can be a source of this kind of anemia, certainly. Um, but men can bleed too, like...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Is that— Did I need to say that? Men can bleed too.

**Justin:**

No, men can bleed. We're not animals, are people not iron giants?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

We still cried at the movie Iron Giant.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs].

**Justin:**

What do you want from us?

**Sydnee:**

So um, but nutritional could be a problem too. Uh, it's, you know, usually their storage or production or a loss problem when it comes to anemia. But, um, we figure that out and then we can, once we know that you're anemic, we can— Which we can do through a blood test, right? That's how I...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

You know, like I said in the beginning, I can look for certain signs, like, I can look at your palms or, like, um, at your conjunctiva, kind of, like, the inner lining of your eyelids.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Like, I can look at the— Inside there and see.

**Justin:**

How's it looking palm-wise?

**Sydnee:**

Yours are fine.

**Justin:**

Nice.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. Nice and rosy.

**Justin:**

Thanks.

**Sydnee:**

Your rosy palms.

**Justin:**

My rosy palms.

**Sydnee:**

You don't wanna be too rosy palmed, then you have liver disease. That's a whole other episode.

**Justin:**

[laughs].

**Sydnee:**

Um, now...

**Justin:**

I'll keep an eye on that though, if you're okay, I'm just gonna sensitively kind of check them.

**Sydnee:**

Well, either that or your pregnant.

**Justin:**

I mean, I'm gonna go with the prior, probably, but either way.

**Sydnee:**

Um, now we don't have this, uh, the idea of green sickness, of course, that's not a thing. I mean, just like hysteria, it is a— It was wrong, it's not a disease process, um, we just do a blood test if we think you're anemic.

And then, um, we don't give people blood just because they're anemic, you have to meet certain thresholds. So if you're just a little low, chances are

we're not gonna... You know, I mean, there are exceptions but for the most part we're not just gonna replace your blood, we're gonna—

**Justin:**

Are you— You mean you'll rectify the situation?

**Sydnee:**

Yes, give you tools to help your body replace the blood on its own is usually the goal, I mean, depending on what the cause is. But we don't diagnose green sickness anymore. But its, uh, legacy lives on. Anybody who reads Shakespeare has probably come across green ladies here and there.

**Justin:**

I always feel a little sad whenever we say goodbye to a disease forever 'cause it doesn't exist.

**Sydnee:**

You know what? As a woman, and usually since these are diseases that were used to, like, you know, keep women in, like, a submissive position, like, to use it to oppress us further...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... um, I'm kind of okay with saying goodbye to this diseases.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. Well, agree, as I say, to disagree. Am I using that right?

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

All right.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, well, I mean, you're just wrong in this situation. [laughs].

**Justin:**

That's fine. Uh, so that's gonna do it for us, uh, talking about green sickness. Um, we'll miss you green sickness. Sorry that you weren't real. [laughs].

**Sydnee:**

Okay. No, we won't miss you green sickness because one of the...

**Justin:**

Goodbye, green sickness.

**Sydnee:**

... main treatments for green sickness was to tell ladies to just go get laid.

**Justin:**

[laughing] Or drop out of school!

**Sydnee:**

That your problem, your— Yeah, that your problem—

**Justin:**

It was like a reverse— Uh, it was, like, a reverse afterschool special. [laughs]. It's just, like, an endless series of women dropping out of school and having premarital sex. [laughs].

**Sydnee:**

Your problem, young lady, is that you cannot— You will be sick and incomplete until you quit school and get a husband.

**Justin:**

Yeah. And that's— Until then, you're gonna have your green sickness.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

Um...

**Sydnee:**

So, that's not true. Stop that.

**Justin:**

Uh, I wanna say a big thanks to Maximum Fun network for having us as part of their family. Go to [maximumfun.org](http://maximumfun.org) to find a ton of great, uh, shows including uh, My Brother, My Brother and Me, which is my show that I do with my brothers and it's fun.

Um, we, uh, wanna thank the Taxpayers for the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro for our program. And I think that's gonna do it for us. Uh, until the next time we have a topic to talk you all about, my name is Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

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

[theme music plays]

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