

Sawbones 149: Cupping

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Clint: Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin:

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

Sydnee:

And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin:

Sydnee, Olympic fever is sweeping the McElroy household.

Sydnee:

Oh, no.

Justin:

I'm just—

Sydnee:

Is Charlie sick?

Justin:

No. She's—

Sydnee:

Oh, I didn't know. Not again. She gets sick constantly.

Justin:

She actually has a, uh, uh, chronic case of wanting to turn the Olympics off and watch Doc Mcstuffins. But, uh, she's, she's—

Sydnee:

Now, to be fair... To be fair, I feel like every time we turn the Olympics on, it is... I'm not saying that there are some sports that are boring. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that if you're a two-year-old, there are some things where there's enough action that it might hold your attention for a little bit. And then, there are other things that it's probably difficult to understand what mommy and daddy are watching.

Justin:

Right. And there are definitely countries that are more boring than others, for sure. I will say that.

Sydnee:

I'm not saying that. [laughs]

Justin:

USA. USA. Every time we turn on the Olympics, it's like Austria and, and, uh, uh, France playing water polo. And it's like, "I... I'm good."

Sydnee:

Now, I have no... I have no qualms with Austria or France. I think they're both very exciting countries. I will say water polo is not the most exciting thing for a two-year-old that is what—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

That is the statement I will make—

Justin:

But, um—

Sydnee:

... if, if you play water polo I am sorry f— [laughs] for your feelings.

Justin:

There, there, there has been a, a, uh, so—like sort of a synchronicity, I think, of our show and the type of things we cover, um, which we kind of stumbled on. And then, it turned into like a big discussion point because I asked you we were watching the four—man relay.

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

And we saw—

Sydnee:

With swimming. With swimming.

Justin:

... with swimming.

Sydnee:

Yeah. [laughs]

Justin:

And wes— Yeah.

Sydnee:

We were watching the, the man swim race—

Justin:

Man swim good.

Sydnee:

... the man... the mini man swim race with the—

Justin:

The fast boys.

Sydnee:

The, [laughs] the—

Justin:

The wet fast boys.

Sydnee:

[laughs]

Justin:

Um—

Sydnee:

We, we, we're really into sports—

Justin:

We love sports.

Sydnee:

... here.

Justin:

Uh, no. But we were... We were watching that as... We saw these weird bruises all over Michael Phelps . And I asked Sydnee, like, "What's wrong with American hero, Michael Phelps , America's pot smoking hero? Amarc— [laughs] America's pot smoking swim boy, Michael Phelps has these round bruises all over him. And I asked you. And you said—

Sydnee:

Uh, he's cupping.

Justin:

Cupping.

Sydnee:

Cupping. Now, I knew... I knew from looking at Michael Phelps just the, the pattern of the bruises. I knew that was cupping. I can identify that. Now, why he was cupping? I did not know.

Justin:

No. Okay. See, that one—

Sydnee:

So—

Justin:

... was the, the weird thing to me—

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

... because you think it would be like the thing is you're out there. Your skin is very prominent 'cause you're getting out there really wet and really fast. And people are going to see that. So, it's like [laughs] that's ver— You think

maybe he could have had his cupping done to give it time to heal over. Like he has cup hickeys all over his body.

Sydnee:

He does.

Justin:

That's not gonna look good in photos. It's gonna look ridiculous in photos. So, man, I hope it really works really well.

Sydnee:

Uh, I... I'm assuming part of that my guess is that he wants people to see his cup hickeys because it's like... I think it's kind of trendy and cool. But we'll... I'll talk about that.

Justin:

It seems to be.

Sydnee:

Yeah.

Justin:

It is all over the place out of nowhere.

Sydnee:

I think it is... I think it is considered kind of trendy and cool among athletes. Um, it was... It was considered trendy and cool when Gwyneth Paltrow showed up at some sort of red carpet event, this has been several years ago, with the cupping marks all down her spine.

Justin:

I don't... I do not remember this.

Sydnee:

Yeah. So, it was... it was very trendy. But it wasn't an athletic thing. It was considered like a kind of a new age healing thing.

Justin:

Right. Right. Right.

Sydnee:

But if you don't know what cupping is or if you think we're referencing something else that cupping could mean—

Justin:

Right. And we aren't.

Sydnee:

No. This is nothing like—

Justin:

It's not the other thing.

Sydnee:

This is not—

Justin:

This is this kind of thing.

Sydnee:

... bedroom stuff. [laughs]

Justin:

For adult times.

Sydnee:

They're not for adult times. Um, now, I'm gonna tell you what cupping is and why Michael Phelps might be doing it.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Everyone has wanted us to talk about this.

Justin:

Yes.

Sydnee:

To be fair, can I just say that we also came up with this idea—

Justin:

Yeah. And then all of a sudden our—

Sydnee:

... independently.

Justin:

... our tweets were filled with people asking about cupping.

Sydnee:

But here are just some of the people who recommended cupping.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Michelle and Tila, and Benjamin and Amanda, and Ian and Maria, and Ashley and Jenna, and Linda and Maggie, and Laura and Brook, and Sean and all of Twitter basically recommended that we talk about cupping.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So, thank you. Thank you all. You don't get complete credit because it was also our idea, but—

Justin:

So—

Sydnee:

... But thank you, anyway.

Justin:

So, what on God's green earth is cupping?

Sydnee:

Okay. So, cupping is, uh... I hate to even call it like a... it's a medical procedure. It is something that you're doing for perceived medical benefit.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

And the procedure is this. You take some sort of cup, usually glass. You can use plastic. There are other ones. Traditionally, it would have been a horn, part of a horn. And you take this cup. And you are going to put them on the body usually like the back is where you see this most commonly. But it can be on the arms or the legs even the face nowadays, anywhere. Um, and you're going to apply suction somehow.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Uh, now, how you apply suction to that cup, it just depends on what kind of machine you're using. Traditionally, the way you would do that is cr— to create negative pressure inside the cup by lighting a little flame inside of it.

Justin:

It creates a vacuum by burning the oxygen—

Sydnee:

Exactly.

Justin:

... and, yeah.

Sydnee:

There you go. And then, put it on the skin. And so, then it kind of sucks the skin up into the cup.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Right? You leave it there for between five and 15 minutes depending on exactly what you're doing and how long and where. And then, you take it off. And you've got a big hickey on your back. Not always. Not everybody has such a ba—I don't say violent reaction, but such a dramatic reaction.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, but it can leave that. Now, there are different kinds of cupping. Um, what I just described is what we would probably call dry cupping which means you take the... whatever the cup is. You create the vacuum. And you apply it. It is listed as not being painful.

Justin:

I think it would be that good kind of pain. You know that tattoo pain at first before the tattoo thing gets really annoying?

Sydnee:

Yeah. People don't describe it like that. They talk about that it's a pressure that you—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... can feel the skin being lifted.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

It's definitely a pressure. But nobody... I never... I didn't read any description of it as painful. And it can be dry cupping that specifically can be used with acupuncture. So, you can like place the acupuncture needle and put the cup over it—

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... is used sometimes. Um, there, you can also add massage oil to kind of lubricate the skin and allow the cup to kind of move across the skin a little easier.

Justin:

I would think that would create, uh, not as, as tight of a seal.

Sydnee:

The... I... See, I thought that too. But I saw that mention multiple places that, that would help move the cup a little bit because I guess there's one..

there's one way where you can do the dry cupping, and then kind of walk the cups down your back—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... that's part of it. Um, when you use fire to create the vacuum, you can also call it fire cupping. [laughs]

Justin:

Wow. That's very dramatic.

Sydnee:

It sounds very exciting. Did you have a fire cupping today?

Justin:

That sounds like if I was gonna get peak physical performance when I got in the pool, I'd wanna go fire cupping.

Sydnee:

Fire cupping. Uh, now, wet cupping is something entirely different.

Justin:

That's the adult one.

Sydnee:

[laughs] No.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

But it does sound like the adult one. Wet cupping or Hijama is not practiced everywhere. You can find this in some parts of the Middle East and actually in Finland as well and some saunas, they do this. Wet cupping, I'm gonna tell you what it is, and you can tell me what this sounds kind of like. [laughs]

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

You're going... It's the same sort of procedure except you're going to apply the cup first, get a little bit of suction going, take the cup off, make multiple small cuts in the skin in that place—

Justin:

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... and then put the cup back on.

Justin:

Oh, so, definitely bloodletting 100%.

Sydnee:

It's... Yeah. It's basically like bloodletting but with suction.

Justin:

Not basically, sweetheart. [laughs] Like we're blood... It's turbo bloodletting on nitrous oxide. It's like suped-up bloodletting with the power of suction.

Sydnee:

It is, it is very similar to bloodletting. Uh, and, of course, when we say bloodletting, we mean the, the very, very old practice of—

Justin:

Stealing your blood to make your body run better.

Sydnee:

... of bleeding to make you healthy. Um, this cupping can also be combined with something called moxibustion.

Justin:

Whoa. What?

Sydnee:

I had... Yeah. So, this was new to me too.

Justin:

A good word. I'll say that.

Sydnee:

So this is the practice of burning mugwort—

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

... near or maybe on a patient's skin. It's used all on its own for healing purposes. But you could also take a piece of mugwort, put it on the skin, and light it on fire underneath one of the cups. And then, you've got cupping plus moxibustion.

Justin:

And it's very helpful at that point.

Sydnee:

And then, it's definitely—

Justin:

Very effective.

Sydnee:

There you go. Yes. Now, how... Cupping is very old.

Justin:

I believe—

Sydnee:

Cupping has been a long for... been around for a really long time.

Justin:

If I were to guess, I would guess it dates back to china because I think this is part of traditional Chinese medicine, right?

Sydnee:

It is. It is. It dates back thousands of years to ancient China. But it— at first, some of the original mentions of cupping have a very specific purpose. So, you could take, like I mentioned, like an animal horn back then is probably what you would have used or like a piece of bamboo, and either boil water in them or again light a fire in them to create a vacuum, create suction, um, and apply them to something like a, like a boil on your skin, is what some of the first descriptions of this were, were for.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Uh, the reason being was it was to try to like draw it to a head and draw the pus out.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

So, you were creating a vacuum for a very specific reason.

Justin:

That makes sense to me.

Sydnee:

Yeah. That, that kind of does make sense. Now, I don't know if the, if the pressure you applied would be enough. But, you know what? It would probably in multiple episodes of this, it, it may help with that.

Justin:

So, it's sort of like a non-chemical version of a pore perfect strip. [laughs]
You're just drawing the stuff out of there.

Sydnee:

Yeah. It was suction instead of like tape—

Justin:

Yeah. Right.

Sydnee:

... instead of sticky.

Justin:

Sticky.

Sydnee:

Yeah. Uh, so, it was, it was almost like, almost like a surgical tool kind of like a semi-surgical type thing. Um, the first mention is in the Bo Shu which is written during the Han dynasty. And then, you continue to see it kind of pop up in Chinese texts, ancient Chinese texts, um, for other things. So, like we see these original mentions as almost like a surgical kind of thing. And then,

you see it mentioned for poisonous snake bites. I think the same kind of idea to like suction the poison out.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

The same reasoning somebody is using when they try to put their mouth on a snake bite and suck the poison out—

Justin:

Perfect.

Sydnee:

... which you shouldn't do, by the way.

Justin:

Not at all.

Sydnee:

Do not do that. Don't ever do that. Um, that you see it mentioned for other things as well like for chronic cough, for tuberculosis, for headaches, for abdominal pain, for dizziness. So, you start to see these mentions of it for things that aren't necessarily, you know, specific to the skin.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um, and this continues. This trend of cupping just various places on the body begins to grow as we move through medicine. So, we see it mentioned in the Ebers Papyrus as well specifically wet cupping dates back that far. So, bleeding with the application of suction. Um, and then the Greeks practiced it too. Hippocrates was a big advocate of both dry and wet cupping. Um, Galen—

Justin:

Of course.

Sydnee:

... was a, was a big advocate of it.

Justin:

No. He's gotten in the mix.

Sydnee:

Um, when you read back, um, in one of the ancient Greek texts, one of the medical texts, uh, they talk about scarification with cupping, so the, the cutting of the skin.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Scarification, making, making—

Justin:

Cuts in the skin.

Sydnee:

... cuts in the skin. And cupping, uh, can possess the power of evacuating offending matter from the head of diminishing pain of the same part, so, diminishing pain of your head, lessening inflammation. They thought it was good at restoring your appetite, that if you had a weak stomach, it was helpful for vertigo, uh, for, um, drawing up [laughs] deep-seated defending matter [laughs] to the surface.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Um—

Justin:

I mean technically, yes, I guess.

Sydnee:

For hemorrhages, for promoting menstrual evacuation.

Justin:

No. Thank you.

Sydnee:

Yeah, for arresting the tendency to purification. Elaine Reigers, uh, accelerating and moderating the crisis of diseases, um, basically... Oh, fixing you if you're too sleepy.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

We have a propensity for somnolence.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Cupping will fix that.

Justin:

I mean it will temporarily certainly. [laughs]

Sydnee:

So, basically, dry or bloody, they say all of these methods with cups, all of these things with cups can be healed.

Justin:

Yeah. That, um, that sounds suspiciously to me like the cure-alls, Sydnee. And as we all know at this point, cure-alls cure nothing.

Sydnee:

Cure nothing. Uh, the ancient Romans continued these practices especially at bath houses. This was something you could have had done.

Justin:

Sure. Yeah. You're—

Sydnee:

Why not?

Justin:

Your, your shirt's already off. Why not get crazy in there?

Sydnee:

[laughs] Which seems like kind of a bummer to me because like I, I always kind of thought bath houses were really relaxing and chill.

Justin:

No. I've seen some especially in like Europe where they like beat the heck out of you with like, like sticks and stuff like that.

Sydnee:

Oh, yeah. Some saunas—

Justin:

You know what I mean? Some saunas—

Sydnee:

... where they hit you with branches or whatever.

Justin:

Hit you with branches. I don't know. I saw Michael Palin in Around the World in 80 Days getting the crap beat out with sticks.

Sydnee:

Did, did we see that on Three Sheets, dude. Did— he—

Justin:

Three sheets, maybe, Anthony Bourdain.

Sydnee:

... he... He got beaten up with sticks at some point.

Justin:

...You know what? It may be kind of a popular—

Sydnee:

Yeah. I think Anthony Bourdain did too.

Justin:

Let's watch this guy get beaten with sticks [laughs] kind of thing.

Sydnee:

Maybe, this isn't something they really do. Maybe, [laughs] it's just for people trying to make TV shows.

Justin:

Nothing would please you more.

Sydnee:

Um, but at the bath houses, the, the Romans did definitely practice cupping as well, um, you... that we've found remnants of cups at Pompeii. So, we know that, you know, they were using that prior, prior to volcano.

Justin:

I was... Do you think frozen in lava while they were getting cupping like mid-cupping? That would be very upsetting.

Sydnee:

Um, Celcus mentioned that it was better than bloodletting. So, if you, you, you know... If there's something that traditionally you would have just cut somebody for, do cupping instead. Um, he especially liked it for the removal of poisons or toxins introduced into the body which again it— it's sort of even though that wouldn't work, I can see where you're coming from, from like a very physical perspective.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Like, well, there's poison in the body. Let's just suck it out.

Justin:

Suck it out like with a snake bite.

Sydnee:

Yeah. I mean, it's the same, same kind of idea. Um, and a lot of these reasoning, so, why were they doing all this? Why? Why did they think all this work for all these different diseases? You have to understand this is based on the humoral concept of medicine.

Justin:

Your body's out of balance with the different humours in it. So, we use the suction to get the bad ones out.

Sydnee:

Exactly. So, the, the four humours, blood, and bile and phlegm and... blood and yellow bile and black bile and phlegm, excuse me. Two biles, um, those four need to be in balance. And if you're sick, it's because they're out of balance. And you can remove them by giving somebody something that'll make them puke or poop or pee or spit stuff up, or you can bleed them or cupping was in the same family. So, you could suck things out with cupping, or you could even cut them and put the cups on them. And then, you know, it's a combo.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

Um, so, these are just... That's where this fits into medicine. It's a way of adjusting humours.

Justin:

Which, like, if that doesn't set off alarm bells for you, you should—

Sydnee:

Yeah—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... because we don't... That's not a real thing.

Justin:

That's not a real thing.

Sydnee:

That's not... The hum— The— that concept of medicine, I mean yes, we have blood. Yes, we have phlegm.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Yes, we have bile. But that was not... That was not accurate.

Justin:

No.

Sydnee:

Um, Paracelsus who we've talked about before, uh, advised it specifically for toothaches. [laughs] I don't know where—

Justin:

That seems unreal. Yeah.

Sydnee:

... or how or—

Justin:

[laughs]

Sydnee:

... when. And, and now, you've got to remember again too though when I talk about, you know, that you should use cupping for a toothache, that didn't even necessarily mean that you would put the cup anywhere close to your tooth because it— it's all based on this humours concept of medicine. So, like your tooth hurts, so, draw some... You know, draw the inflammation away from it by putting a cup on your back somewhere.

Justin:

So, Syd, the, uh... I understand that this was happening in ancient times. But like how did we get to this still being a thing in modern times?

Sydnee:

Well, I'm gonna fill you in on that, Justin. But first, why don't you follow me to the billing department?

Justin:

Let's go.

[theme music plays]

[Maximum Fun ad]

Justin:

So, Sydnee, we were talking about, uh, how cupping existed in ancient times. But obviously, it's like still kicking. So, how, how did that happen?

Sydnee:

Right. So, a— as we move forward in history, there are lots of mentions of cupping like continuing in popular use. Um, and again part of this is because this concept of medicine of the four humours, uh, continued. Um, and I should mention too, e— when we talk about like its origins in, in traditional Chinese medicine, we're not talking about the humours. But we are talking about like the vital force, the life force being drawn, exactly, through the body. So, a, a similar concept different, but similar kind of idea.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, in the 1600s there are many mentions for it used, um, for a lot of different kinds of wounds, uh, specifically, so, let's say that you're... you just got cut on, you know, your arm, your left arm. And it's bleeding a whole lot. Um, one thought was that you could do cupping like far away like on the right arm—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... to try to draw blood away from the place that was bleeding. So, it would stop bleeding.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

It was a kind of idea. [laughs]

Justin:

Not really how bodies work or anything. But go for it.

Sydnee:

Now, uh, on the... on flip side, you could use it over a wound if you thought there were too many humors in the wound which probably— What, what I think they were meaning was infection or inflammation if something looks infected or inflamed. Your, your concept may be there's too much humor in there.

Justin:

So, get it out. It's bubbling up to the surface.

Sydnee:

To get it out. Get it out. Cup it.

Justin:

Ugh.

Sydnee:

And then, and then, you'll be fine.

Justin:

So grody.

Sydnee:

They would also use it over a wound to keep it open, uh, was a common theme to, you know, keep something from healing to clean—

Justin:

Healing

Sydnee:

... it out which—

Justin:

That's like—

Sydnee:

That's not... That's not a crazy idea really for someone's we do, we do leave them open. So, that's not... That's not actually completely off base. Now, their though process behind it—

Justin:

But like let's not go crazy. Okay. Like they weren't doing it for the right reasons, right reasons. Like let's not—

Sydnee:

No.

Justin:

Let's not get—

Sydnee:

These were not all the right reasons.

Justin:

They're not doing it for all the right reasons.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, they were widely practiced by barbers who, of course, were surgeons back then.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

So, they were doing a lot of cupping. Um, Paré who we've talked about a lot, one of our early, you know, fathers of surgery, of, of our surgical technique, advised cupping at the neck and shoulders if you have an eye wound.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

Again this idea of drawing down tumors—

Justin:

Getting it out of there.

Sydnee:

... and inflammation and everything.

Justin:

Well, he probably tried the eye thing once. He was like, "You know where cupping would be great on the eye. Let's give it a whirl." [laughs] "Ah, okay."

Sydnee:

It's like that scene in Hostel. [laughs] I don't think that would actually happen. But—

Justin:

Medicine before the 1600s was like a scene in Hostel.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Uh, most of the uses, like I said, we're just employing the cup somewhere to kind of move the humours around instead of bloodletting or making something puke. But again, they were still doing the bleeding with it. So, it was often like, well, don't just do bloodletting. Cut them. And then, suck...

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Cut them and suck on their skin. I don't... Apply a cup. [laughs] Um, it was also advised there was one surgeon who wrote that it was really good to use for if you have a depression in your skull as in like a depressed area like a dent.

Justin:

Like if you have a dent in a car where you just bang it back out.

Sydnee:

Yeah, or pop it out like one of those suction things that you put on your car. And then, just like—

Justin:

Yank it out.

Sydnee:

Yeah. You do that.

Justin:

But for your head.

Sydnee:

But not if there's a fracture.

Justin:

Oh sure, right.

Sydnee:

No. And they were quick to say that not if the bone's actually broken. But if it's just kind of dented, you could just kind of like cup it back into the place.

Justin:

Let's— We're, we're not crazy. [laughs]

Sydnee:

We know this won't work if it's broken. If it's broken, then just drill a hole in it.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

We know how to do that already.

Justin:

Yeah. We're experts.

Sydnee:

Uh, it was also very popular again for any kind of venomous wound. So, we've gone beyond snakes. Now, we're scorpions, spiders, bees, hornets, anything that was thought to be venomous. Cup it. Um, it was also used on tumors. There was a belief that... I mean because you have to understand, you don't, you don't... Wh— when I say tumors, a lot of people are thinking, "Well, how did they know they were there?"

Um, at the time since there would have been no treatments or understanding really of, of cancer, uh, you could get met— like metastatic tumors that you could see very easily—

Justin:

Great.

Sydnee:

... or things that got so big that you could see them. And so, there was a belief that whatever was inside the tumor is something unnatural and diseased, and bad, and dangerous and evil and dirty and—

Justin:

Yes. I mean, yeah.

Sydnee:

Yeah. But—

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

But the idea was that if you could just kind of suction it out of there—

Justin:

Get the evil out.

Sydnee:

Get the evil out of the tumor, then, it would be okay. So, you could use cupping there to try to like get all the stuff inside the tumor to come out. Um, it was generally regarded as the second choice to bloodletting.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So, like if your, your best bet is bloodletting. But in certain conditions—

Justin:

Listen. Go with the old safe standard first. Tried and true bloodletting is not—

Sydnee:

Right.

Justin:

... gonna let us down.

Sydnee:

Just leech somebody.

Justin:

Just leech somebody. But, you know, there are these experimental [laughs] forefront edge of medicine techniques we've been playing with where we put a cup on you and wait.

Sydnee:

There were... It's funny because there was one mention where, uh, somebody actually said at one point, "You know, we, we tend to use a lot of bloodletting when someone is bleeding." [laughs]

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

You know when somebody gets like a wound, they—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... get cut or something, we, we bleed them more. And maybe, that isn't... Maybe we sh— shouldn't—

Justin:

Hey, guys—

Sydnee:

Maybe, we should cup them instead.

Justin:

... can we all talk for a second. [laughs]

Sydnee:

But it wasn't... It's not like that was widely adopted. It's not like if I went, "You know, you're right."

Justin:

Shut up, Jerry.

Sydnee:

If the problem is they're bleeding, maybe more bleeding isn't the solution.

Justin:

Yeah. No.

Sydnee:

That didn't... But somebody thought about it. Somebody's like, "Maybe the cupping instead."

Justin:

Because everybody back then was vampires.

Sydnee:

Uh, [laughs] but you would prefer cupping. You would for a few conditions. One would be what we would think of now is a stroke.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

If somebody has a stroke, instead of bloodletting, you might consider cupping them. Um, for pain in general, um, I guess [laughs] because if they're already hurting—

Justin:

You don't wanna—

Sydnee:

... don't cut them.

Justin:

.. cut them. Yeah.

Sydnee:

So cup them instead. And then hysteria, so, thank you for that. I don't think I covered that when we did our Hysteria episode.

Justin:

Yeah. I don't, I don't believe so. No.

Sydnee:

So hysteria, if you haven't listened to our episode, if you're not familiar with the concept, was a fake made—up disease for women—

Justin:

When they got out of the line.

Sydnee:

Yes. Men made it up for women to explain when, you know, we're just all crazy and emotional.

Justin:

Crazy. Right.

Sydnee:

And our uterus just go wandering around our bodies making us crazy. That was hysteria. So, why not? It's a fake disease. Let's do a fake treatment.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Let's cup them.

Justin:

It's a beautiful match.

Sydnee:

Um, in plague times, you could also try cupping [laughs] a bubo. That was one, one use of cupping, you know, the big giant swollen nasty lymph nodes—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... that people would get—

Justin:

Now, now, I'm with you.

Sydnee:

... in their groins and the armpits and everywhere. And you could just try to cup it.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

So, why are we still doing this?

Justin:

I thought you were supposed to tell me that [laughs] because I have no idea.

Sydnee:

Uh, this is still... Moving, moving forward in history, cupping is still practiced in alternative medicine. It is still a part of traditional Chinese medicine. But then, it— like a lot of things that kind of disappeared in the West and then resurged, yeah, I would put cupping among those things.

Um, if you're interested in like who does it the same, uh, traditional Chinese medicine practitioners might do cupping. Um, and then, if you find people in, in the West who do acupuncture, they may also provide this, this—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... not necessarily. But s— you see people who do one commonly, you know, license to do the other.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

Um, what do they advise it for?

Justin:

Cool licensing board whoever is issuing those.

Sydnee:

[laughs] Yeah. I guess you have to observe somebody do it. [laughs] I don't know.

Justin:

If you observe somebody do it, you still want to, then, yeah.

Sydnee:

Oh, I don't know. I mean, like, what to license them for it?

Justin:

I guess. I mean—

Sydnee:

Just watch them make sure—

Justin:

I don't want the, the homeopathy cups after me if I put an unlicensed cup on somebody and try to burn it.

Sydnee:

You know what? The homeopathy cup— cups can come after me anytime they want to.

Justin:

Oh, please.

Sydnee:

I have, I have some words for them. [laughs] Um, it's advised for everything from arthritis to asthma, colds, indigestion, um—

Justin:

We need a better word than advised [laughs] because that does sound like, like, by who, exactly, Sydnee? Like advising sales like somebody behind a table somewhere is, is, is—

Sydnee:

By—

Justin:

... recommending this happen.

Sydnee:

... by people who get paid to do it. That's who recommends it.

Justin:

Okay. All right. I'm with you.

Sydnee:

Uh, and, and again, like... And you see this huge list like the every... everywhere you go, um, someone who is either like a proponent of certain

complementary and alternative medicines who is writing about, um, cupping or someone who, like I said, gets paid to do it will tell you different things it can be used for. Like I saw anemia and hemophilia listed, um, which specifically, uh, with the hemophilia, I probably wouldn't do wet cupping.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

That would be my advice personally. Um, for infertility, for acne, headaches, depression, irritable bowel syndrome, diarrhea or constipation, that always makes me raise an eyebrow like—

Justin:

Well—

Sydnee:

... just either—

Justin:

.. I mean there would—

Sydnee:

.. just either.

Justin:

There might be a physical way you could use cupping with, with the constipation angle. You just kind of like get it out. Will that work?

Sydnee:

Well, honey, I mean if that's what you think, why don't we just use a plunger? [laughs]

Justin:

I mean that does work in cartoons, some of the more rippled ones.

Sydnee:

Right. [laughs] What cartoons are you watching?

Justin:

Some of the more rippled ones. Please, move on.

Sydnee:

Uh, weight loss. It's, oh... I saw that. It's good for weight loss.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

And then, you know, somebody's trying to... Fatigue, menstrual cramps, muscle cramps, injuries, and to increase blood flow to the muscles of athletes especially the muscles that you use a lot that might particularly get strained or sprained or injured or if you do have an injury that needs to be healed faster with increased blood flow. This is why athletes are using it. This is the belief.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

So, uh, sometimes, you may see a cupping pattern that would correspond to the specific muscle group that that athlete may use more because of their chosen sport.

Justin:

Do you think I noticed a lot of like shoulder and biceps?

Sydnee:

Yeah. Upper body kind of cuffing—

Justin:

Tumors. Yeah.

Sydnee:

... because especially if you... if they either thought those muscles had been, you know, stressed or strained or injured or just because those are the muscles that they're going to use a lot of, that kind of thing. Um, but again, because it's also based on this idea of vital force and energy and, and then this concept of humours and all that, it— it's also... It's not just like, um, a physical thing, not just blood flow. But you see things like well, and at the same time, we'll remove pathogenic factors like wind and cold and damp and heat from your body, and will allow your pores to open more so that other pathogens can escape through them—

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

... which is not how bacteria works by the body. Um, and you see like I... On some of the websites that, that offer this therapy where you can sign up and then let go and have this done, they'll tell you that it can also remove congested blood and humours—

Justin:

Hey, it's not—

Sydnee:

... which is not... I mean that's, that's not a... That's not in question. We're not confused as to whether or not humours are right.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

That's not up for debate.

Justin:

That one's settled.

Sydnee:

There are lots of other things that I know people will argue and question. And well, maybe that's true. Maybe it's not. Um, but humors is not one of them. Uh, it's also an alternative therapy that is used for cancer. Uh—

Justin:

Get bent.

Sydnee:

They now have small silicone cups that you... that won't leave marks. So, you can do that if you don't want the bruising. There actually is an option that probably won't provide... probably won't cause the bruising.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

Um, and they can even do those on your face if you want to.

Justin:

Sure.

Sydnee:

So, the studies.

Justin:

Yeah. Like—

Sydnee:

The studies.

Justin:

... it doesn't work, does it?

Sydnee:

So, any study that... They've, they've done huge meta—analyses of these studies. They did a big one in 2012. And what they basically said was the majority of studies don't show any harm, but don't really show any benefit. There is... There have been small studies that have shown that it helped with certain conditions, uh, not with athletic performance. So, that, that has never been proven. So, what Michael Phelps is doing I can't vouch for unless he just likes it.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Um, but, uh, the studies that have shown that were, were mentioned specifically by the authors of this meta-analysis to be very small and highly biased. They found them to be not necessarily appropriately conducted to—

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

... remove bias.

Justin:

This is not a shock.

Sydnee:

Um, so, I would say that, at this point, there is no good evidence that cupping does anything. There are some studies that suggested it was possible. And so, I could at least trying to be non-biased. I could at least say more study is necessary if we really wanna prove that this does anything for anybody for any condition at all... [laughs] We're gonna need to do a lot more.

But this is a hard thing to study because if you're gonna do, you know, this versus a placebo, that's what we do, right? We like with the medicine, we give some people a fake pill and some people the real pill and see who gets better.

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

How do you do fake cupping?

Justin:

A good question. I don't know.

Sydnee:

It's a really difficult thing to control for.

Justin:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Sydnee:

Which is part of why people say, "Well, we know it works, and you're never gonna get a good study on it because we can't make a good study on it. So, just trust us it works."

Justin:

I mean the same could be said of acupuncture, right?

Sydnee:

Acupuncture is really hard to do too. They do that—

Justin:

But there is some benefit to acupuncture, right? We... That's another episode.

Sydnee:

Yeah. That's, that's a whole other thing. But they, they found a way to do with acupuncture by not doing it on the right places.

Justin:

Hmm, okay. Yeah.

Sydnee:

That's, that's... And they'll call it like the sham acupuncture which means—

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

... that it's... yes, you got needles in you. But they weren't the right places. I don't know how you do that with cupping because it's not necessarily one place anyway.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

They're not... They can't... They don't have to be specific points. I don't know.

Um, and also, just on the, on the other hand even though overall it's not found to be detrimental, there have been cases where it's been dangerous, um, either because the bruising was so severe, because they actually did like the cutting as well and so they damaged the skin or it got infected. Um, also burns, you can see some pretty horrendous looking burns out there from people who just weren't very good at it and instead of just creating the vacuum and putting it on there actually got the cup hot enough that it seared the skin.

Justin:

Oh.

Sydnee:

Um, so, you can see some pretty nasty burns. So—

Justin:

Savage.

Sydnee:

... if, if this is something you're going to have done, I'd want you... I, I'd... You should be do— going to somebody who's done it many, many times and is very good at it at least.

Justin:

So, is Michael Phelps like a goofball? Is there anything, any reason he could be doing it?

Sydnee:

Uh, so, I've read a lot of articles by people who are into athletics as to why athletes would continue to do this with no good evidence that says they should because... And the idea is this, even if it is placebo effect, even if it is just that strong belief that it did something for them, makes them think they feel stronger or faster or whatever.

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

When we're talking about these, these sort of athletes who, you know, operate at this level one hundredth of a second, one, you know, one, one tiny inch faster than everybody else, one millimeter faster than everybody else, makes a difference. And if placebo effect is all it is, even if that is the truth, if it works, it works. So, just that psychological edge that they might feel they have because—

Justin:

Mm-hmm.

Sydnee:

... of cupping even though it's not really the cupping may be enough to drive them over the edge and make them win. It's sort of like... Have you seen the Kinesio tape that everybody has on them?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

Have you seen anybody with brightly colored neon tape on their bodies?

Justin:

Yeah.

Sydnee:

So, that's kind of in this same category. This tape was created to relieve like pain and pressure on muscles by just gently lifting the skin off of the mu— Like you apply it in specific patterns and ways. It's not just random.

Justin:

Right.

Sydnee:

It's, it's very specifically placed by trainers and people who know how to do it. And it's supposed to improve your range of motion, and then relieve this pain and pressure. The studies on it are incredibly weak. It's never been definitely— definitely proven to do any of that. But you see tons of athletes wearing it. And the same argument could be made. If you think it gives you an edge, maybe it does.

Justin:

Right. So, just don't tell Michael Phelps. It's like a magic feather kind of vibe.

Sydnee:

So, what I'm saying is, listen, everybody at home. If you are a friend of Michael Phelps, don't tell him about this podcast. [laughs]

Justin:

We've all got to keep it a secret because from Michael Phelps.

Sydnee:

Keep it a secret because it may... Maybe, that's enough. And, and if it doesn't harm anybody—

Justin:

Except it does. You just said that.

Sydnee:

... except unless you get burned.

Justin:

Burned or bruised terribly.

Sydnee:

I, I... Yeah.

Justin:

Okay.

Sydnee:

I also would rather not have all those purple hickeys on my back. But that's just me. So, that's, that's, that's the thing. I don't know that there's any evidence that says cupping does anything. I'm sorry if this is your thing. I know, I know that this is many people's thing. This is gonna be somebody's thing.

Justin:

I'm so sorry in advance for that.

Sydnee:

Sorry in advance for that. If you don't get hurt by it and it makes you feel better, you know, more power to you. But if you're doing it instead of seeking some sort of medical treatment for, for whatever your condition is, um, I would not advise that at all. I'd get the... to a doctor.

Justin:

Folks, that's gonna do it for us. Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to our program. Thanks to Maximum Fun Network for letting us be a part of their extended podcasting family. You can find a ton of great shows at maximumfun.org for shows like Shmanners, which is a show made by my brother and his wife, Teresa, who's an etiquette expert. And they try to navigate those waters. It's a fascinating show.

And there's a ton more on there. Sydnee makes one with her sisters called Still Buffering. And my brothers and I make some. So, get on there, maximumfun.org.

Sydnee:

It's called My Brother, My Brother and Me.

Justin:

Next year.

Sydnee:

It's pretty good.

Justin:

It's all right. Uh, uh, thank you to The Taxpayers for letting the use of their song, Medicines, as the intro and outro of our program.

Sydnee:

We've been mentioning it. But if you haven't checked out my dad and my Uncle Michael's podcast, Court Appointed—

Justin:

Go for it.

Sydnee:

... sort of a legal version of Sawbones, check it out on iTunes.

Justin:

Check it out. Folks, that's gonna do it for us until next week. 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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