

Sawbones 475: The Tea That Doesn't Cure Cancer (and Might Make It Worse)

Published on October 24, 2023
Listen here on themcelroy.family

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

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. Oh man. I just got lost in the tones there, I think. I felt like John Michael Montgomery. [briefly scatting in the style of John Michael Montgomery before trailing off]

Sydnee: You haven't introduced yourself yet, so I can't introduce myself until you...

Justin: Mm... I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy. See, you have to start.

Justin: I'm sorry, it's been so long since we're recorded a regular—

[crosstalk]

Sydnee: We're both down here today. We're both—

Justin: —regular...

Sydnee: We're both down low today.

Justin: Down low.

Sydnee: I know. It's the morning.

Justin: 'Tis the season. I feel—I always feel like it's starting to get cold here. And I always feel like, at this time of year is when I start thinking like, "This is a mistake. Certainly, it's going to get warm again for a while." Like, I let myself believe like, "We'll have some more sunny days." You know, some more—I, 'cause I don't want to think that I've just like, I always feel like I didn't lap it up, you know what I mean? I feel like I didn't—I should've spent more time outside.

Sydnee: Yeah. I always have the same thought. You—

Justin: But I don't like spending time outside. But I feel like I should have.

Sydnee: The thought I always have is, "You didn't sit on the porch enough."

Justin: You didn't sit on the porch enough.

Sydnee: That's—That's a thought I have a lot: "You didn't sit on the porch enough, Sydnee. It was warm. You could have sat on the porch, while you did whatever you were doing. While you were researching this show, you could have sat—Not this episode because it was already cold. But I could have sat on the porch more while I was researching other episodes and I didn't."

Justin: I didn't. But here we are. There's no—there's no point in looking forward. Things will—or, sorry, backward. [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] There—

Justin: Paging Dr. Freud!

Sydnee: There's some—there's some ennui for you.

Justin: [laughs] No, there's no point looking backward. There's uh...

Sydnee: Maybe just there's no point?

Justin: Should I just be a—should I...

Sydnee: I don't feel that way. I'm not really cynical. I don't feel that way. I'm not nihilistic.

Justin: I feel like, you know what, we've had a lot of fun watching a lot of scary content. You know, there's good things about every time of year, I guess.

Sydnee: Yeah, we had.

Justin: Except for February.

[pause]

Justin: [laughs] Sorry. And January. Those two months are like, whatever. I feel like things still start to heat back up in March.

Sydnee: Cooper's birthday is in February.

Justin: God bless her for it.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: She didn't turn things around. For the month, I mean. It's not enough to save a month. Love the kid, but...

Sydnee: Justin, I had never heard of this one—this topic, this week before.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Except one of our listeners told me about it. Thank you.

Justin: We rely on them so much.

Sydnee: We do. Thank you, Melissa, for sending this in. And as always, if you find out about weird medical stuff and you think it would make a— please send it my way, if you think it would make a good show, because most of our shows these days come from you all, and I really appreciate it.

Justin: And that's for your weird medical artifacts that you send to our P.O. box.

Sydnee: Oh my gosh, I got...

Justin: P.O. Box 5400, West Virginia 25706 is the address.

Sydnee: I got some real wonderful ones this last time.

Justin: Yeah. But be thoughtful. Be thoughtful about the space. I don't want—I don't, you know. We can't take 30 books. Please don't ship us 30 books.

Sydnee: No. Yes we can. Yes we can. What are you doing?

Justin: [bursts out laughing]

Sydnee: What are you doing? Are you kidding me?

Justin: I'm antagonizing you.

Sydnee: The books are my favorite. I love everything. I love the books, and can I tell you, I save—if you send me a book, and it's got like a little note or a card or something from you too, I always keep the note or the card in the book, so that whenever I pull the book off my shelf and open it to look at something or read, there's your little note. And it's like this wonderful little—it's just wonderful. Thank you. Thank you.

Justin: The amount of books...

Sydnee: The joy it brings me, I cannot express. Thank you.

Justin: The number of books you are now condemning me to hauling back from the local post office... Do you know the looks they give me, Syd, with your books?

Sydnee: I love my books.

Justin: Okay. So what is—what is the—come on!

Sydnee: We're talking about the Essiac formula, or Essiac tea, you may have heard it... It's a tea, it's a formula, but it's a tea.

Justin: I'm a little—I'm a little more interested in the S-E-X formula. It's just these muscles...

Sydnee: Oh my gosh.

Justin: ... plus these moves. S-E-X.

Sydnee: No. No, no, no. Essiac as in E-S-S-I-A-C.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That is the name.

Justin: Okay. Uh...

Sydnee: I will tell you why it's...

Justin: Hold on, I'm trying to use my Latin. I'm not getting anything from it.

Sydnee: Yeah, no. You're not going to be able to figure this one out until... I'm going to tell you. There is a—we know exactly why it's called this.

Justin: I would hope.

Sydnee: You might be able to puzzle it out. See if you can Sherlock it out before I tell you.

Justin: Do. Not. Talk. To. Me. Like. That. [laughs] I do not appreciate... I am not—I am not the child on Mr. Wizard. [laughs]

Sydnee: Just see. Just see. You might be able to.

Justin: [as Mr. Wizard] "Why, you might even be able to figure it out yourself with your tiny child brain."

Sydnee: No, no. This has no—you don't have to know any science to figure this out. Okay? We talk a lot on our show about fake cures.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Right? And I usually say something about how a lot of them are pretty harmless. A lot of fake cures, at the end of the day, I mean, if you think about a lot of homeopathic things. They don't treat anything, they don't cure anything, but most of them don't do anything either. Most of them... We're talking about homeopathic stuff, most of it is just water, honestly. It's just a bottle of water.

And even stuff that actually has, like, some sort of ingredient in it, most of them aren't going to kill you, right?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Some of them do, so please just don't take them willy-nilly. But a lot of the herbal things that we talk about either don't do much in the body, or do so little that it doesn't matter. However, another reason that these things are dangerous is something we don't talk about a lot on the show, which is that they offer an alternative to actual medicine.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And in some cases, are recommended instead of actual medicine.

Justin: Because it keeps people from getting the care that they need.

Sydnee: Yes. That is a factor that I don't think we talk about a lot, which is, if you're encouraged to pursue this non-evidence-based, you know, completely untested, unproven substance as a cure for whatever your disease process is, over actual evidence-based medicine, then you may unnecessarily suffer or even die from something that was treatable or even curable. Right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And we don't focus on that piece of it. Like, and maybe I should be a little more careful about saying, like, "Worst case scenario, you waste your money." No, the worst case scenario is that you avoid actual medical care and don't get the care you need and deserve.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And I think that right now, I feel like distrust of medical professionals is still pretty high?

Justin: Yeah...

Sydnee: I mean, like, it wasn't great before Covid...

Justin: It was not.

Sydnee: The faith that people have in us as healthcare providers... I think that because of all the disinformation and misinformation during Covid, of all the people who lied and said that we were falsely diagnosing to bill higher, and all of those—which all were complete lies, by the way. Nobody was doing that. I don't think I need to tell you all that.

Justin: [chuckles dryly]

Sydnee: But we weren't doing that. We were struggling to try and keep people alive and not get sick ourselves. That's what we were all doing.

Justin: And trying to keep up with the best treatment practices, which shifted, it seemed like monthly, for a while.

Sydnee: Because we were—it was a real-time, real-time science. We were learning in real-time. But I think that because there is so much mistrust, and a lot of that in this country has to do with the fact that you should not trust the healthcare system in the United States of America. It is not built to take care of you. It was never—it's not broken. It was not built to take care of you.

Justin: You can trust the individual people within the system.

Sydnee: Yes. There are providers that you can trust. Absolutely. And you can trust evidence-based medicine and science to move you closer to a state of well-being. All of that is true. But the healthcare system was built to make money, and so if you don't trust the system, I don't blame you. I don't either.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: But because of all that... [laughs] But because of all that... uh... the alternative medicine industry can look a lot more attractive, right? Because it's a rebellion. And that's on both sides. Like it's natural, it's crunchy, and so there are some people who are drawn to it because of that. Like, it's more the way we're intended to live.

And there are some people who are drawn to it out of... kind of like the other end of the political spectrum, like, you know, conspiracy theory...

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: ... And "we know better" and "the government's trying to hide things from you" kind of stuff. Either way.

So I want to tell you the story of Essiac formula, because I think this is a good example of something that pulled people away from actual treatment, because it offered a cure where there is no cure. It seemed safer, cheaper, more natural, all of those sort of buzzy things that people are attracted to. And it had a lot of testimonials, which we see a lot in these kind of medicines, that led people to believe it might work.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: This is the cancer cure that is not a cancer cure. It's not a cure for anything. But yes, the Essiac formula is specifically touted to be a cure for cancer.

Justin: I feel like...

Sydnee: One of the most egregious.

Justin: I feel like if they figured it out, I would've heard about it. It would've made headlines.

Sydnee: Well. Yeah. Well, I'm telling you about it, but it's not—I mean, I...

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: And it has given a lot of people false hope and it's... I mean, as far as I can tell, no more than a tea.

But, Rene Case is at the center of our story. She was one of 11 children. Her parents—you can read by the way, in her own words, a lot of this story that I'm telling you comes from her first person account of her life, her career, the invention of this cure. There are lots of websites devoted to her and then her actual story, from her book and from her autobio—from her life, right?

So, like, it's kind of nice to have a first person account of somebody's life. She had a good childhood in Ontario. Her parents were a barber and seamstress. She grew up wanting to take care of others. It sounded like a very religious upbringing, like, providing and caring for others was very

much part of her life, and she wanted to do that, so she went into nursing, a great field to go into if you love taking care of other people and you want to give back.

And in nursing, she made a discovery. And so, to kind of get into her story from how she figured this out, she was—this was the mid-1920s, by the way. That's the era we're in right now.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: She was working at the Sisters of Providence Hospital in Northern Ontario. And she noticed that on one of her patients, they had some scar tissue on their breast. And she was asking about what—why—what is that scar from.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And the patient said that about 30 years prior, she had had breast cancer. She had had advanced cancer in that breast.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Okay? She went to a doctor and the doctor said, "We're going to have to remove that, because it's cancer." Okay?

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: That was the treatment plan: to remove the cancer; which is still, you know—

Justin: Sound.

Sydnee: Surgical treatment of cancer is still a mainstay of can—you know, a lot of, not all, but a lot of cancer treatments to this day. However, in this patient's words, "Before we left..."

They were at a camp, where they were seeing this doctor. They were—her husband was a prospector, so they were kind of out in the wilderness when this was discovered. So before they left the camp to pursue this surgical treatment, she came across a "old Indian medicine man."

Now, I believe in this case, they're talking about someone who would've been indigenous to this area...

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: ... of... Ontario, is where we are. And told this medicine man that she had cancer. And he said, "I can cure it. I have this remedy. You don't have to have surgery. Take this instead."

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: So, she went with the medicine man out into the wilderness, they collected certain herbs, he showed her which ones to collect. She helped. They brewed a tea from these herbs. She was told to drink it every day, and she has had no problems with cancer ever since.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: She was able to avoid surgery. She was able to avoid any treatment, and she lived—she was 80 years old at the time of this telling—and drank her herbal tea every day.

Justin: So, we're already setting up for, like, several different—if you've been listening to Sawbones for a while—you can already see the, like, logical things that are going to be brought into this, right?

We've got appeal to ancient wisdom...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: There's going to be the appeal of, like, the natural thing, right?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: It's natural and it's ancient, and there's also a layer, I think, of like, other cultures having more wisdom. Older cultures, older societies have more wisdom than we do about healing, [mumbles] which is kind of like appealing to ancient wisdom.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: But like, you can already see some of this tenets. Like, there are things that are rooted deep down in us, right? Like, we want to believe that the care for the thing is just growing out of the ground and we just start to...

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: You know, too city-bound to see it.

Sydnee: Have you seen the movie Medicine Man? It's in the ants!

Justin: [excitedly] Yeah Sydnee, I have! It rains the whole time, it's a wild flick.

Sydnee: It's in the ants.

Justin: [whispers] It's in the ants.

Sydnee: It was in the ants.

Justin: That's a spoiler for Medicine Man, though.

Sydnee: Oh, I'm sorry.

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: You—if you haven't, that is a wild statement to make, by the way. Like, "It's in the ants!" What does that mean? Um, yeah, I mean, obviously—

Justin: There was a time when Sean Connery and Lorraine Bracco could headline a picture. Think about that. [sighs] Times have changed.

Sydnee: Man, can I tell you the fantasies about that movie? Anyway.

Justin: Your... It was... Yeah.

Sydnee: So...

Justin: [in disbelief] Sean Connery died? Come on! Go ahead.

Sydnee: So, this young nurse hears this story, she thinks it's intriguing. She remembers it. She remembers the herbs. The patient recounts to her the herbs that were in it.

Justin: I'd remember it too if somebody told me they cured cancer.

Sydnee: That they cured cancer.

Justin: [Laughs] No special merit points for that.

Sydnee: But like, we have to—we have to build the story. So, like, a year later, she's working with this doctor. They're walking around out in the garden, and the doctor apparently points to one of the plants growing in the garden and says, "If people would use this weed, there would be very little cancer in the world." And she looks and it's one of the same herbs that was in this tea that she learned about from this patient. So she starts to think, "Huh, maybe there's some truth to this."

So we're like building—so we have this, like, natural folk cure, and now we have medical science authenticating it.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: A doctor said, "Yes, it does cure cancer."

Justin: [scoffs]

Sydnee: "It does work." And we—and also I love the idea that this doctor is, like, casually like, "This cures cancer. [Lowers voice] We're not telling anybody. People love that."

Justin: I meant to—yeah, they love that angle.

Sydnee: So then, she finds out that a family member has cancer, and she's very worried because, you know, I mean like, this is why, unfortunately cancer is so ripe for this kind of fake cure.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Is because this was true in the 1920s and it's true today: we often can't cure things. Sometimes we can. It is not uncommon that we can't. And so people start to feel hopeless and desperate, and will be more, you know, vulnerable to these kinds of scams.

So, she decides, you know, "I'm going to get all of the herbs that are necessary to make this tea and bring it to her." Which I think, still, we're pretty harmless at this point. She—

Justin: Yeah. Making a tea.

Sydnee: This family member has undergone actual cancer treatment. She's just bringing her a tea, too. I think that's fine, you know.

Justin: Not a T-2. That is actually the terrible, uh, metallic pred—

Sydnee: [Stifles a laugh] Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Justin: Terminator that can shapeshift. So, she didn't bring her—yeah, I don't want her to bring a T-2.

Sydnee: If Medicine Man gave me good dreams, Terminator 2 gave me so many bad dreams as a kid.

So anyway, she makes her this tea, and she claims that after that, her aunt [mumbles] or family member, lived for 21 years after this. Even though doctors told her the cancer was incurable, she had very little time left, she lived for another 21 years.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Right? And so, because of this, other—there are doctors who are involved in this patient's care. So this was a patient who was actually receiving care from doctors, told there was nothing left to do, she got this tea, supposedly beat the odds. And so the doctors start to become interested in this and start asking her, nurse Case, "What are you doing? What's this tea? What's the deal?"

Justin: [as a doctor] "Tell me about the tea."

Sydnee: "Tell me about the tea."

Justin: "What's the—spill the tea."

Sydnee: And they come to her, and they're like, "We got this other guy who's got cancer and..."

Justin: Spill the tea...

Sydnee: Huh?

Justin: [almost inaudible] I said spill the tea...

Sydnee: Spill the tea. [laughs] Spill the tea on the tea. Give me the tea. Give me the—no, just give me the tea.

Justin: Give me the tea.

Sydnee: Give me the tea.

Justin: Yeah, got it.

Sydnee: We could do that all day. So, they... they're like, "Look, we've got this guy who, like, we don't expect to live more than like a week or so. Why don't you come try your tea? If your tea's so good, come give him the tea." So, she comes in and she gives this guy who's in late-stage cancer, who has, like I said, about a week or so to live, the tea. He was bleeding actively, at the time. The bleeding stopped within the first day and he lived another six months.

Justin: [inhales] I think that that's great, and six months is definitely more than zero months. But I do think that if you're saying, "I have a tea that cures cancer," it's a little weird for someone to make it six months, and then you're like, "Ta-da!" [laughs] Personally, I think that that's not...

Sydnee: Well...

Justin: ... not a great hallmark of efficacy.

Sydnee: So, according to nurse Case, what happened next is that, because the doctors saw this with their own eyes, a petition was drawn up and sent to the Department of National Health and Welfare in Ottawa to allow her to do independent research on this tea.

Justin: Does this end with Case having the cure—

Sydnee: And they—the doctors send...

Justin: Oh, sorry. [Sydnee laughs] Does this end with Canada having the cure to cancer, they just won't tell us about it. Is that where we're going with this?

Sydnee: [laughs] I don't think—I think some of our Canadian listeners can weigh in on that. But I'm pretty sure...

Justin: Canadian doctors hate this one weird trick where they can cure cancer.

Sydnee: But they won't tell the U.S. about—no, Canadians are way too nice to keep that secret. You all would tell us. You would tell us!

Justin: Come on...

Sydnee: You would tell us.

Justin: They gave us Bieber. They're definitely going to give us the key to cancer.

Sydnee: You all shared insulin. You shared insulin with everybody. You would tell us.

Justin: You would tell us.

Sydnee: So, anyway, they send this petition and she, you know, after this feels like, "This is going to be great. I'm going to save the world with my new tea." Except that then, she, uh, gets—after they send this petition, according to her, two doctors from the Department of Health and Welfare show up at her door to arrest her for practicing medicine without a license.

Justin: Well, I never! [laughs] How dare they.

Sydnee: And this would, you know, kind of be the, like, next phase of this. She's got this tea. She learned about it in these, you know, sort of, who knows if they're real, stories. She gives it to people, saves their lives, it's miraculous, and the state suppresses it.

Justin: Classic.

Sydnee: It's a perfect setup. So does it work, what's in it, and what did she do next? I'll tell you after we go to the billing department.

Justin: Aww, let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: It's a, uh, it's a low point, Sydnee, we find ourselves in prison. Hard times for our hero, but I feel like she's going to rise above all this. I'm keeping the faith.

Sydnee: So, she has been told to stop, but... [laughs]

Justin: She does not. [laughs]

Sydnee: She does not. So, even though the government is like, "You can't go, you can't go around saying you have the cure for cancer, because you don't. Like, you don't have any—" There's no research on this, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Like, we have, like, so far three, maybe, anecdotes. And again, some of this just—I can't explain to you some of these testimonials. And I couldn't... You can go through any patent medicine and tell me a story and I wouldn't be able to explain to you, other than suggesting that people are lying, and I don't want to suggest people are lying, I don't know. I don't know. Weird stuff happens. The body does all kinds of weird stuff.

And part of it is that with, whenever we're talking about cancer, there's only so much you can predict.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: We give you timeframes and a prognosis and like ranges of weeks or months or whatever. And sometimes it's less, and sometimes it's more. There's always that unpredictability, you know.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: In medicine, if I could tell everybody exactly how much time they had left. Well that would be horrifying. I'm glad I can't.

Justin: [bursts into laughter]

Sydnee: That would be—I'm—of all the, like, super powers I could get, that would be the worst one.

Justin: Imagine walking past the door and they're like, "Dr. McElroy, do you want to check in here?" and you're like, [as Sydnee, but like a gremlin] "Eh, there's no point. I don't want to. I'm pretty busy."

Sydnee: And they're like, "See you tomorrow Dr. McElroy." Actually...

Justin: Actually, hey, listen...

Sydnee: No, I would hate that. I'm glad I can't.

Justin: [wheezing] It's really funny. It's a funny idea, but I don't think it's practical.

Sydnee: No, and we can't. And we do the best we can, always understanding that, like, the human body is infinitely more complex than... Even with all of our tools and tricks and diagnostic things, we still understand.

So, she continues... She basically finds a small subset of doctors who are willing to, like, "We will work with you." And again, these are only patients who are under the care of doctors already.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: And so this is in conjunction, which I still don't have a giant problem with. Like, I always think about a good corollary to this is, while I was breastfeeding, you used to make me lactation cookies all the time.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: I don't really think those lactation cookies helped me lactate. I don't really... There's not, like, the ingredients that are in there... I don't—there's not a ton of evidence that this was making a giant difference in my milk production. But they were delicious.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: There was no harm, and I was happier because you made me the cookies.

Justin: True.

Sydnee: So, I don't know... Like, there's no harm in that, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: So, if you're a patient who's undergoing cancer treatment and you decide to drink her tea, too, that sounds okay. Now, I will call that into question [crosstalk] before this episode...

Justin: Do not drink the T... Do not drink the T-2. It is liquid metal. It may seem very thirst-quenching. It will be a disaster.

Sydnee: So, while she's doing this, one of the doctors who she's working with says, like, "You know, you can get some more credibility if you actually did, like, studies. Like you need to do, like tests."

Justin: Science.

Sydnee: You need to do science on this. So, from 1920 through 1930, she actually does some experiments. Like there's some mice in a lab, there. She's working in a lab in a Toronto, Christie Street Hospital Laboratories. And she—these mice are injected with a kind of sarcoma, a kind of cancer, and basically, she kept the mice alive longer with her Essiac tea than anybody had ever been able to do. Like, she kept them alive 52 days—

Justin: 80 years. Oh. No. 52 days.

Sydnee: No. Well, I mean, they died of cancer, but like, she did keep them alive longer, supposedly, than other people had. And she says like, "I had been doing my own treatments at home—my own experiments at home. These are not the first. I, of course, did this in my basement. But, like, now I've done it in front of doctors and they saw that these mice lived longer."

And then another doctor was like, you know, I think instead of a tea, it would be better if you, like, injected it into people. Maybe that's why we're not getting—maybe that's why we're not curing the cancer in these mice. We need to make it into an injection.

So, they started testing injecting mice with tea. [laughs]

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: Which, this feels... [starts cracking up] Sorry, I know that these are all Canadians, but this feels like a very British solution. Like, "We'll inject them with tea." I don't know. Sorry, this is not—that was not a slam on anybody who's British who listens to our show. Tea is great. Coffee is better, sorry.

Justin: Sorry.

Sydnee: Sorry. Sorry! Sorry.

Justin: Sorry.

Sydnee: But tea is great. I appreciate tea. But, anyway, so, they were like, "This is even better. When we inject it..." They, like, were curing their cancer. They believed that it was carrying off all of the diseased cancer cells. All the cancer cells were completely removed.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So, they start giving these injections, like you would get a flu shot or something.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Basically, of an herbal preparation, that's basically tea. And so then they start trying that in humans. So these same doctors, again, that they're working with, they start applying this injection to humans who are otherwise receiving cancer treatment and incurable. Okay?

And it's the same kind of thing, like there's somebody who has cancer of the throat and tongue. They give him an injection of the Essiac, and initially, he had a terrible reaction to it and they thought that they had killed him.

Justin: Oh, wow.

Sydnee: But then, after that, he went home and lived another four years.

Justin: Jeez, okay. Well...

Sydnee: So, again, you continue to get these kinds of anecdotes. So, she is working, she's still working as a nurse.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: There are select doctors who will let her come in and give tea to people. Tea shots. [Laughs] Not T-shots. Not like testosterone shots. Like tea, as in T-E-A, shots of tea.

Justin: I'm with you.

Sydnee: Got it? Okay? And then, in her [laughs] in her apartment, she's having people come visit her for tea.

Justin: Oh, God.

Sydnee: So, going to get—you know she's going to get in trouble for this again.

Justin: You're not supposed to do this. Stop it.

Sydnee: No, because she's having—she's had up to 30 people a day are coming to visit her in her apartment...

Justin: Come on.

Sydnee: ... to get treatment for their cancer. Which is going to be a problem. She even makes an appointment at one point, because she really wants to legitimize this, so she goes to Dr. Frederick Banting. Which, do you remember who Banting is?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Well, I alluded to him earlier.

Justin: Who's Banting?

Sydnee: He's the discoverer of insulin.

Justin: Oh...

Sydnee: Remember? That was—the Canadians gave us insulin?

Justin: Oh, the Banting Institute. Of course.

Sydnee: Uh-huh. Exactly, exactly. So she goes to Banting and she claims that he agrees with her. Like, basically, "I'm not saying this cures cancer," he looks over all of her stuff and he's like, "Yeah, I mean it's the best thing we got."

Justin: He starts winking. "I'm not saying it's a cure for cancer..."

Sydnee: "Don't tell anybody."

Justin: Not the Americans, especially.

Sydnee: But he, and supposedly, he's like, "This works better than anything else we've got for cancer, so far." I don't know—this feels a little bit like, you know how we told the story about how Einstein investigated the sex box?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Yeah. It's the same—it's the same, kind of like, Banting investigated this tea and was like, "You really got something here." But then, like, encourages her, like...

Justin: Now, this is her quote. That's her retelling of this story.

Sydnee: Yes. Oh, that's her retelling—that's what I want you to know.

Justin: If you asked Banting, he'd be like, "Uh, the tea? Let me tell you about that day. That lady would not leave. I eventually just looked at her and I was like, 'I don't know, maybe.' And then she finally agreed to leave. That was all the encouragement I gave her."

Sydnee: See, I think that—I love these firsthand accounts, though, because this is her—I mean, she's a true believer.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like, there's no doubt that this woman felt she had the cure for cancer. I don't think she was lying about that. I don't know about how true every aspect of these stories are.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But I do think she believed that this was a cure for cancer. So, anyway, he did recommend, like, "You need to, like, actually apply to do research on this. Like, formally research this in big studies to prove that you have it. Like, if you've really got a cure for cancer, you've got to do that."

Because, like, you know, that's kind of what he did for the insulin, like, researched it. [laughs]

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: He didn't just say, like, "I got this wild idea and I'm going to inject this stuff into humans and see what happens." No, they did proper research on insulin, which is also, by the way, why insulin is real and works and saves lives and, you know, is a vital medicine.

Justin: Those things.

Sydnee: So, she's saying, "I wanted to do the same thing." But, here's why she decides she didn't. She decides that when Banting registered, and by the way when you do this you have to share your formula, right?

Justin: Hmm.

Sydnee: If you're going to actually get it properly tested and authenticated, you have to share your secret with them. You don't get to keep it a secret.

She said that if she was going to do that, she was worried that basically, they would take the formula and suppress it and it would disappear forever.

Justin: Oh, yeah.

Sydnee: Because when Banting did that, and I think she's maybe alluding to sexism and the fact that like he was a doctor and she was a nurse, that he was taken very seriously and celebrated and honored, and that if she did the same thing, she would not be. Which, I mean, there's some truth in there, but like—

Justin: 'Cause she's a woman.

Sydnee: But also, you just don't want to test it, because if you test it for real, you might find out that it doesn't work.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, she decides at that point, "I'm not going to go that route. I'm not going to do what he did. I'm not going to actually submit my formula and try to get it, like, you know, tested for real and do the clinical trials and everything that Banting did with insulin, because I know it's a conspiracy. I know that they will suppress it. I know that even if it works, nobody will ever find out about it," which is a very convenient little logical trick there. "And so, I'll just continue to do it on my own."

So she did. She continued to see patients on her own and—

Justin: That is not, by the way, can I just say, can I make a point?

Sydnee: What?

Justin: Those are not the actions of a true believer.

Sydnee: No, that's true.

Justin: I do not think that if you really believed it, deep down in your heart, that you would—that you would not take every opportunity to blow it up as big as it could possibly be, like to get it out to as many people as possible. If you're a real true believer, I don't think you invent something like that.

Sydnee: And, I mean, I guess it's true because what she has after this is a really good story for people who want to believe her. Because what—for the rest of her life, basically, she is continuing to secretly treat people, and occasionally getting reprimanded for it. Occasionally getting letters, like cease and desist-type letters to say like, "You can't do this. You're practicing medicine without a license. You're promising people treatment and cure of cancer and that's not what this is, and you've never gone through the proper channels to get any of this tested—" which may have been offered to her, I don't know how much of the Banting story that you believe, but like, you know, she doesn't go and do that work to prove that this is anything.

And she would also need to involve, like you can't prescribe medicine if you're not legally authorized to prescribe medicine, which is what she's doing. So, she basically kind of takes this, like, martyr kind of position at this point, "I have this secret cure for cancer. If you come to me, of course I will share it with you, but I cannot tell it to anyone else."

She says that she treated people for 25 more years, with her formula, and saved all these lives and helped people live out of pain. And then after that, after she eventually died, would pass that knowledge on to just a select group of people around her.

Justin: Disciples, if you will.

Sydnee: Yes. If you're curious what is in this tea, which, by the way, I still haven't told you what's in this tea.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So, there are different formulas of it now, like if you look up Essiac tea, you'll find slightly different variations of it. But the four main herbs are burdock root, slippery elm inner bark, sheep sorrel, and Indian rhubarb root. And then you'll find different formulations that might have other things for it.

One thing to make note of, if you read some of the stories behind the different companies that sell this, some of the herbs they include that they say are from this original preparation that was given to a woman by, you

know, someone indigenous to the area; some of the herbs that they claim don't actually grow in some of these places. So that's already—it already calls the whole thing into question, because some of these plants aren't native to the appropriate areas that they're talking about.

And then, of course, when you do research into the various components of this, they never found any evidence that any of this helps with cancer in any way. There actually have been studies done to look at specific herbs within this formula to see, and in most cases, there is no efficacy whatsoever. It does not slow any tumor growth. And they actually had a couple studies that showed it increased the rate of cancer growth.

Justin: Whoa!

Sydnee: Yeah!

Justin: I didn't see that coming.

Sydnee: So, since—and this is, by the way, since 1977 is when the formula was sold and trademark rights were given to another corporation, and this is why it's widespread. So since 1977, it's been sold, touted as a cancer cure. Initially there were a lot of these companies that would encourage these patients to seek this out instead of cancer treatment. But, obviously, you get in trouble for that.

So, it's like a lot of alternative medicine now. It is supposed to be complementary to—do not seek this instead. Seek this in addition.

And I found, like, FTC complaints that have been issued against these companies for false advertising, for promising cancer cures, for saying that it has been proven to cure cancer when there is absolutely no scientific evidence that it does anything.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: There was one study that showed it might include the rate of cancer growth, which I think you'd have to do again to say is that true or not. But either way it doesn't help.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: We know it doesn't help. It's usually marketed as like a supplement, like a dietary supplement.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: So, you know, we know the problem with that. You don't have to—the same guidelines don't apply as some sort of medicine, since they're not calling it medicine.

Justin: Yeah, I'm looking here and it's still very much for sale.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. No, you can buy it. The first thing when I started looking up Essiac tea, what I first got were a bunch of ads where I could buy Essiac tea. And they're, again, I think the thing is that even though they're going to be really clear on all the advertising and say it doesn't treat or cure anything, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: They're going to put that on everything, because they have to. And they're going to tell you, still go to your doctor. But this is in addition. But we know that the problem is there are a lot of people who would love to believe that they can take care of themselves without doctors. They would rather—they'd rather avoid us.

And I mean, I get it. I understand. And maybe the only reason that they have to say this doesn't treat or cure something, that you should also see their doctor, is because [lowers voice] the government doesn't want you to know...

Justin: [deviously] Yes...

Sydnee: But again, there is not evidence that any of the components of these do anything for cancer growth, any of the studies that were ever done

were small, were done in labs, were done in mice, maybe at best, none of them ever showed any effect. These testimonials that we have, I don't have an explanation for, other than, you can say anything.

Justin: You can say anything.

Sydnee: And cancer treatment is an evolving science, and so there are lots of unpredictable things. I have seen patients live much longer than the prognosis that they were given by the experts. And I don't think it had anything to do with a tea. I think it's just because there's still a lot that we're working to understand.

Essiac also, just to round it out, it can cause headaches, nausea, diarrhea or constipation, vomiting, low blood sugar, liver damage and kidney damage, allergic rashes, and rarely serious allergic reactions. So, it doesn't do anything. It might hurt you. It might increase the rate of cancer growth, although I don't know for sure. But either way, it doesn't do anything for cancer.

Justin: It sounds like we're going to have to give this one a C+ [Sydnee laughs] on the ol' Sawbones scale. No, it sucks pretty bad.

Sydnee: If anybody tells you to use Essiac tea, please don't. It's not—I mean, other than, "This is a tea I like." But please do not use it to treat or cure anything.

Justin: But even don't do that, because apparently it might make cancer worse!

Sydnee: Have you figured out what the—where Essiac comes from?

Justin: Um, no. But I was really more listening to you, I wasn't really trying to think.

Sydnee: Look at her name.

Justin: Oh...

Sydnee: How do you spell her last name?

Justin: Oh, it's uh... Oh, C-A-I-S-S-E. Oh, is it just rearranged her letters?

Sydnee: It's just backwards.

Justin: It's just backwards! Oh my God!

Sydnee: It's just her last name... Yeah, the formula's her last name backwards.

Justin: Oh my God, that's great.

Sydnee: That's where that comes from.

Justin: That's great.

Sydnee: But yeah, so...

Justin: That's fun. At least that's fun.

Sydnee: I mean, and it's tough because, like, it sounds like she was a very sweet lady who was probably an excellent nurse, I would imagine. But it's very unfortunate, because whether she was a true believer or not, this tea was definitely, for a while, touted as an alternative. Do this instead of what your doctors say, which is incredibly dangerous. And, again, false hope.

Justin: All the classics.

Sydnee: Missing out on actual treatment. And possibly doing harm. So that's the story of Essiac tea. Thank you again for sending it in, Melissa, and if anybody else has suggestions, I always love them.

Justin: Yep. Thanks so much for listening to our podcast. We call it Sawbones, and you should too, because that's what it is called.

Thanks to Taxpayers for the use of their song Medicines, is the intro and outro to our program. Thanks to you, actually, my friends, the most for listening. We really appreciate you. We hope you've enjoyed yourself. We hope you join us again next week for Sawbones. Because it'll be good—no.

We hope you join us—we hope you join us again next week for Sawbones. Until then, 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]

Maximum Fun.

A work-owned network...

Of artists-owned shows...

Supported directly by you.