

## Sawbones 64: Asthma and Allergies

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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. Getting all nervous.

**Sydnee:**

About what?

**Justin:**

Well, you know, it's Thanksgiving in a week or so.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. And you're nervous about Thanksgiving?

**Justin:**

I'm nervous about Thanksgiving, and not for the usual reasons, not 'cause some—

**Sydnee:**

What are the us—hold on, what are the usual reasons?

**Justin:**

Gastrointestinal.

**Sydnee:**

You have... Wait, you get worried about gastrointestinal problems?

**Justin:**

Will I be able to eat enough, will I eat the right things? And my baking, I'm worried about my baking. Will I bake, will everything I bake come out okay?

**Sydnee:**

I don't—

**Justin:**

My cooking.

**Sydnee:**

... I don't, I wouldn't call these like the usual, or like... Usual for you, but I don't think that those are normal concerns for people in Thanksgiving.

**Justin:**

Well, aside from, aside from those—

**Sydnee:**

You know you can control like what you eat and—

**Justin:**

... [laughs] can you? That's debatable. But for me, uh, Thanksgiving is kind of a scary time. I got a little bit of like a, kind of flashbacks sometimes to uh—

**Sydnee:**

To turkey?

**Justin:**

... No, no not to turkey.

**Sydnee:**

Football?

**Justin:**

No, not to football.

**Sydnee:**

Family?

**Justin:**

Well, sometimes. Uh, no, I have flashbacks to... This is so really hard for me to talk about, but that one Thanksgiving that I had asthma.

**Sydnee:**

Okay. Well—

**Justin:**

Oh wow.

**Sydnee:**

... No, wait.

**Justin:**

Wow, that's still so fresh.

**Sydnee:**

You didn't, you didn't have asthma.

**Justin:**

I had asthma. I remember. I had it. It was um, like seven or eight years ago, but it's still so vivid. And I had to get an inhaler, and I remember that.

**Sydnee:**

Right. But I mean, you, you don't have asthma. Like that's the only time you've ever had to use an inhaler in your life.

**Justin:**

I've seen it... Yeah, I know, but I know—

**Sydnee:**

You had like a, like a post infectious reactive airway disease.

**Justin:**

... I, well, I had that inhaler, that asthma kit inhaler. So, um, and I think the doctor said I had asthma, so I'm pretty sure I had asthma.

**Sydnee:**

Are you thinking that it was triggered by Thanksgiving?

**Justin:**

I, I—

**Sydnee:**

Is that, is that the connection?

**Justin:**

... I just, every time I start to see those turkeys pop up, I find it gets harder to breathe for me.

**Sydnee:**

That's, that's, every time you feel grateful, your airway starts closing?

**Justin:**

Yeah, I'm grateful, and I'm like, "Oh, I can't... Somebody get me a paper bag." Or a straw? I can't remember, it's been so long since I had asthma, but man did I ever have asthma.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think you know much about asthma.

**Justin:**

[laughs] it would be uh, incorrect, as I am a survivor, but uh, maybe you could try to educate me about it I guess.

**Sydnee:**

I think I will. I think I'll, I'll tell you some things I know about asthma. And while I'm at it, I'm also going to tell you some things I know about allergies.

**Justin:**

Oh, I got those too.

**Sydnee:**

Because the interesting thing about if you go back allergies—

**Justin:**

I'm living with allergies.

**Sydnee:**

... And I—

**Justin:**

... I'm not dying from them, I'm living with them.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] I would agree with you on that. I think you do have allergies, and I do as well. And probably anyone who's listening in the uh, Ohio River Valley, where we live.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. Hello.

**Sydnee:**

Also has aller— ... I think I treat allergies maybe more than anything else, seriously. I mean it's, it's just rampant here. So—

**Justin:**

So why did you wanna talk about these two topics together, Sydster?

**Sydnee:**

Uh, the main reason is that when I started researching one, I kept stumbling upon the other, and, and so then I switched to the other and vice versa. And the reason is for a long time, people really didn't understand what caused allergies, or what caused asthma, or, you know, what, what would distinguish one respiratory illness from another basically.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

You know, if somebody's coughing, or sneezing, or short of breath, or wheezing, you know, runny nose, it was all the same. We used to treat it all the same way no matter what caused it. And so if you're trying to read about the history of how did people treat asthma or how did people treat allergies, or really any, how do people treat colds?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

You're gonna come across the same things over and over again, because, you know, they didn't know that it was allergies. They don't know what an allergy is, so.

**Justin:**

So, when did we start to become aware that this might be a thing?

**Sydnee:**

Well, before I tell you, let me real quick, I wanna thank specifically, uh, Whitney suggested one of these two, I think asthma, and Nicolas suggested allergies. And many, many other people have suggested these topics, but thank you guys for bringing them up. Um, we—

**Justin:**

If you wanna suggest a topic, you can email [Sawbones@maximumfun.org](mailto:Sawbones@maximumfun.org).

**Sydnee:**

That's right. And we, I try to get around to him. I know some people have tried to like email the same thing a couple times to bump that up. I'm trying to get to them all. There's a lot of medicine out there. Anyway.

**Justin:**

Thankfully.

**Sydnee:**

So we, yes—

**Justin:**

We're not complaining.

**Sydnee:**

... No.

**Justin:**

It's good.

**Sydnee:**

It's a good thing. We can keep doing our show. So we have known about the idea of allergy, let's start there, as far back as Ancient Egypt. Um, we understood that for some reason, there were foods, substances in the air, things people came into contact with that would make some people ill, but other people seem to tolerate fine.

**Justin:**

Mm.

**Sydnee:**

We didn't know what that meant, but we understood that concept. Um—

**Justin:**

That's, I guess it's a fairly obvious one to, to see. So, one person, you know, drinks the cow's milk, and has a really bad diarrhea, and then the other guy doesn't.

**Sydnee:**

Exactly. So we knew that for some reason, you know, that was something that doesn't make everybody sick but some people. And the, the first example that was documented was the, I would say unfortunately named King Menses.

**Justin:**

Mm.

**Sydnee:**

Not a great name.

**Justin:**

It's a rough path. Rough path to heal.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, he died from a wasp sting.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

From anaphylactic shock, presumably, although not that they would have used any of those words.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause they didn't have... Maybe wasps. Although like, wasp in Egyptian, like not wasp.

**Justin:**

Can you imagine, can you imagine how crazy it would be—

**Sydnee:**

In English.

**Justin:**

... Without an understanding of allergies that sometimes bees kill people, and sometimes they just hurt?

**Sydnee:**

That's a pretty horrifying way to live.

**Justin:**

That's terrible!

**Sydnee:**

Uh, similarly, the son of the roman emperor Claudius, his name was Britannicus—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

... of the encyclopedias.

**Justin:**

Yeah. The encyclopedias family.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, was severely allergic to horses, which is actually—

**Justin:**

That's a tragedy.

**Sydnee:**

... That is, because they rode 'em a lot. And he couldn't. He would actually end up... he couldn't see. He, I guess his allergic response was so strong, I don't know if it was his face would swell up, or his eyes would water to the point that he couldn't see, but he couldn't see if he rode a horse.

**Justin:**

Now my eyes water when I see horses, but that's because they're just so free and beautiful.



**Sydnee:**

[laughs] That's why we have so many paintings of horses in our house.

**Justin:**

That's why I keep so many, that's right.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, and it was suggested in some of the things I read that maybe that's why his other son, Nero, became the next ruler, 'cause he wasn't—

**Justin:**

'Cause he could, he could get down with the horse.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, he could ride a horse [laughs] He, Britannicus couldn't like survey all that they, you know.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

All that they—

**Justin:**

Surveyed?

**Sydnee:**

... Yeah.

**Justin:**

Yeah. You know.

**Sydnee:**

You know what I mean?

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

He couldn't like check out the property.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Unless he walked there, and that was gonna take days.

**Justin:**

Right, 'cause the property's so big.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, King Richard III was allergic to strawberries.

**Justin:**

Uh, I think you can work around that.

**Sydnee:**

This actually, this came into play in history. Um, he ate some before a meeting he had with Lord William Hastings, and then he developed hives, and he blamed the hives on Hastings, said that he cursed him, and caused the hives, and then had him beheaded.

**Justin:**

Hastings. Should have gone with the crème brûlée, dawg.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] It was the strawberry.

**Justin:**

That's rough.

**Sydnee:**

It's really, yeah. Um, but most of the time, like I said, allergies were treated like any other respiratory symptom. And if we're thinking about like allergy symptoms, runny nose, and sneezing, and coughing, and, and all that, uh, you know, it was treated the same way that we would treat a cold, or that we would treat asthma, or bronchitis, or anything else.

So what I'm gonna talk about next is kind of, a lot of these treatments are the same no matter what the actual ailment, you know, if we could go back in time right now, and diagnose these people, what it would have been. So, the Egyptians understood the idea that breathing was important.

**Justin:**

Yes.

**Sydnee:**

That's pretty good.

**Justin:**

Good job.

**Sydnee:**

Um, they had this whole system that they figured out where they thought there were tubes in the body that delivered both air and water to all of our organs.

**Justin:**

Uh, okay, you could be further off.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, no, I mean that's not, that's not totally wrong. And that if for some reason those tubes got blocked, so that you weren't getting air somewhere, which you would demonstrate by, you know, not breathing.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

That you could use something inhaled to fix it.

**Justin:**

Okay. Good, good, we're getting there.

**Sydnee:**

So they actually had a, kind of a recipe if you will, for, I guess, the first inhaler. So you take seven stones...

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And you put them in a fire so they get really hot.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

And, and then there are three different substances you could use at this point, I guess for the medicine, so to speak. Frankincense, yellow ochre, or grapes.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

You take whatever you have, I'm gonna say grapes, because that's what, of the three, of those three things, that's what I would have.

**Justin:**

Yeah, I mean, as always.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Well, I mean, I just don't, I don't know where to buy frankincense.

**Justin:**

Mm-mm.

**Sydnee:**

So, grapes. And you put some on the hot stone, you know, so it creates fumes, and then you put it in some sort of vessel that has a hole in it. They're not specific here, so whatever you have that has a hole in it.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So that you can put a reed into the hole, and then inhale the fumes through the reed.

**Justin:**

So, basically a hookah.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I was gonna say a bong, but yeah.

**Justin:**

Basically, it's a hookah.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

I mean, especially like the hot stones. Like that's, that's basically a hookah.

**Sydnee:**

True, that is a hookah.

**Justin:**

Yeah, it's like a hookah.

**Sydnee:**

So it's like an asthma hookah. But, but the idea—

**Justin:**

Certainly a lot less nerdy than the, than the inhaler, I guess.

**Sydnee:**

It is. I mean it looked pretty cool as you were doing that.

**Justin:**

Caterpillar from Alice In Wonderland. Ooh, can't breathe. Not me.

**Sydnee:**

And so that you could do this... [laughs] You can do this, and it supposedly would help your asthma. And this probably worked, I don't know, maybe worked better than the prevailing theory at the time which was, you're either possessed by a demon...

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Or you've done something to anger God, and so, just basically go sacrifice a lot of goats or something.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

So, which I would guess doesn't work at all.

Uh, Hippocrates understood that, you know, again, breathing was important, and that he recognized panting specifically as a bad sign.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

If somebody was panting. Um, which I would say that this is probably what we would now say someone is short of breath, or just, or dyskinetic, or they're breathing fast maybe, or wheezing even. But all of these things, he, he knew that whatever the cause was, you know, this was a bad thing. And he didn't know what triggered it, but once, you know, the, the cascade happens so to speak, he said what would happen is that you'd get extra phlegm, and that was one of the humors, you know, phlegm was one of the ways we get back to the humor system of medicine, different liquids—

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm. Right. Right.

**Sydnee:**

... In your body that cause problems. Phlegm was a bad humor. It could accumulate in your brain.

**Justin:**

True.

**Sydnee:**

Flow through your pituitary gland, and then clog your sinuses and lungs.

**Justin:**

So they have a pituitary gland. They knew about that one.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. They knew about that one.

**Justin:**

Just not this, they also thought humors were involved.

**Sydnee:**

They just also thought that phlegm clogged up your brain and your sinuses and, yeah.

**Justin:**

Okay. You know what, I'm gonna give you guys an E for effort, but it's a good try. Kinda got a few things very, very wrong, but, you know, I liked that you discovered the pituitary gland.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. And I mean that they gave asthma the name asthma. That's, it comes from a Greek word for panting or for wind.

**Justin:**

Here's a true story, embarrassing, when I was in elementary school, we had a, probably a medical student in retrospect, uh, come to give us a, a sex ed.

**Sydnee:**

I bet it was a medical student.

**Justin:**

Probably was a medical student.

**Sydnee:**

Or a resident. I did that as a resident.

**Justin:**

Okay. So maybe it was a resident. Uh, I remember he was British, and kind of snooty.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

But uh, uh, he, uh—

**Sydnee:**

We all are. Doctors are all British and snooty.

**Justin:**

... And it was supposed to be a very um, like sort of open conversation, you know, back and forth. And uh, he mentioned the pituitary gland, and start talking about, you know, its effect on puberty or whatever, and uh, I said to him in this like open sort of free exchange of ideas, keep in mind I'm in elementary school, I said, I told him, uh, "Oh, the pituitary gland's in your head? I thought it was in your penis." And he laughed, and he said, "Uh, maybe yours is."

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

And the whole class laughs at me.

**Sydnee:**

That was mean.

**Justin:**

That's why I never asked another question about medicine, and that's why I find myself in the sorry state that I am today.

**Sydnee:**

That was really mean.

**Justin:**

It was mean.

**Sydnee:**

I don't, I don't approve of that at all.

**Justin:**

Thank you.

**Sydnee:**

When I did that, when I taught that class, I had similarly odd questions, and I don't think I made fun of any of the children.

**Justin:**

Okay, moving on.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think I did.



**Justin:**

Moving on from that embarrassing sidebar.

**Sydnee:**

So he did by the way make some connections to the environment. Thought that there was something around people that was triggering maybe the symptoms, whether they be in reality allergy, asthma or allergies, but he didn't know what. And um, throughout the Greek, you know, Greek period, and the Roman times, there was a lot of study on respiration, uh, the discovery of respiratory muscles that we use muscles just specifically for breathing.

Uh, it, they used to think before that, that it had something to do with warming up the heart, you breathe, then it warm the heart, and then that made you breathe more, and I don't know, something warm. You know, heat was always a big theory, right?

**Justin:**

Yeah, it feels good.

**Sydnee:**

Heat makes everything work. But the treatments they use for all these different symptoms really didn't improve anything very much. It was the same kind of thing we, we've covered many times in many episodes, the idea that if it's a problem with your humors, you just need to get rid of one, or all, or some, and things will get better, so they give you medicines that make you pee, make you poop, make you puke, they bleed you, you know, or put a hot compress on it.

**Justin:**

Yeah. That feels nice.

**Sydnee:**

Which I guess is more benign than all those other things, but. But making you throw up or pee probably didn't fix your asthma.

**Justin:**

No. Not pleasant.

**Sydnee:**

What's interesting is that as we move forward especially, in this, this probably started in China, but you see the use of this in different cultures,

even when we come across to the Americas, uh, some of the indigenous cultures were using ephedra.

**Justin:**

Now that sounds familiar.

**Sydnee:**

You probably remember it from diet drugs.

**Justin:**

Yes, yes, yes.

**Sydnee:**

It was banned for teasing diet drugs.

**Justin:**

Was—is that the same? No, different.

**Sydnee:**

Yes, yes.

**Justin:**

Nice.

**Sydnee:**

Um, part of it, but yes. Uh, but ephedra is a, you know, it's an herb, it's a naturally occurring substance, and it was used by many different cultures for the treatment of what we would call now asthma, uh, because it actually also works to open up your airways, broncho dilators what we would cause that.

**Justin:**

Huh.

**Sydnee:**

Call that. And so, it, it did work for that. Um, obviously we don't use that now, but, you know, it has other, it has other side effects. But it does work for that. And you see that echoed all throughout different places and times. Um, Pliny actually had something... Pliny, our Elder.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Actually had—

**Justin:**

Friend of the show. Pliny the Elder.

**Sydnee:**

... A very important contribution to this kind of um, conversation. He noted that pollen could cause a problem.

**Justin:**

Pliny. Getting the rare, the rare uh, hit there.

**Sydnee:**

He was all over that.

**Justin:**

Drum and bass.

**Sydnee:**

He, he noticed that there seemed to be some associate— association with pollen, and he advised use of the Chinese herb, ephedra.

**Justin:**

Pliny. Good job, my friend.

**Sydnee:**

And he did say that you should probably drink it in red wine.

**Justin:**

Okay, well.

**Sydnee:**

Which doesn't hurt, but... And then, he said, you know, if that, if you don't have that I guess, or if it doesn't work, or if you don't like it or whatever, instead you could drink some wild horse blood, or perhaps some millipedes soaked in honey, or maybe just some fox liver.

**Justin:**

Oh Pliny. Yeah, you blew it.

**Sydnee:**

So... And he came so close.

**Justin:**

Flew too close to the sun.

**Sydnee:**

He came so close.

**Justin:**

So close, Pliny.

**Sydnee:**

And then you gotta throw horse blood in there. And Justin, I'd really like to tell us more about this, but before I get there, I'm gonna need you to visit our billing department.

**Justin:**

All right, let's go.

[theme music plays]

[ad break]

**Sydnee:**

So, as we're moving forward we have figured out that something in the environment, Pliny told us, something, probably pollen is causing some kind of respiratory symptoms for people. Uh, in the 1500s, a lot of people started calling the condition, you know, the idea that you would have breathing problems or, you know, upper respiratory symptoms from something in the environment, they started calling it rose catarrh.

**Justin:**

Rose catarrh.

**Sydnee:**

Blaming it first on roses. That's where the ro—I mean, they're saying it's triggered by roses. Rose. And catarrh meaning any kind of like cold like symptoms.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So you have a rose catarrh. So you get called symptoms when you're around roses. Roses were unlikely as the main culprit, uh, but they were very pretty and prominent, and I don't know, it sounded romantic.

**Justin:**

Take the heat off the daisies.

**Sydnee:**

I have the rose catarrh.

**Justin:**

Yeah, it sounds like very fancy disorder.

**Sydnee:**

Doesn't that sound better than allergic rhinitis?

**Justin:**

Much [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

"I have allergic rhinitis." "I have rose catarrh."

**Justin:**

Certainly, certainly when you say it like that.

**Sydnee:**

The popular girls always got rose catarrh. I just got allergic rhinitis.

**Justin:**

Aww. You can have rose catarrh if you want, sweetie.

**Sydnee:**

Later they started calling it summer asthma.

**Justin:**

Like a nice little... I mean, maybe a little less romantic than rose catarrh, but not bad.

**Sydnee:**

But that's, I guess that's kind of the same idea as your Thanksgiving asthma.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

Turkey day asthma.

**Justin:**

My, my summer asthma is kicking in.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, but again, the reason that I'm lumping all this together is that they don't, they didn't know any distinct pathology. So somebody could be accused of having summer asthma when they really do have asthma, they have allergies, or they just got a cold. So who knows. Um, in India, physicians started advising that people use an herb called stramonium or jimson weed, um, and that they... And actually by smoking it.

**Justin:**

Now, okay—

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

... I'm no expert, but I cannot imagine that helps.

**Sydnee:**

Here's the interesting thing. So, no, the smoking part is not good. Obviously inhaling smoke, no matter what it's smoke from, if you have asthma or other respiratory illnesses is a bad idea. The herb that they picked though is an anticholinergic, which means that it also, here's what you need to know, it also would help dilate the airway somewhat. It's similar today to if you've seen commercials for Spiriva.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

It's kind of similar to that. I am not advocating you go smoke jimson weed. I'm just saying—

**Justin:**

Too late. Already blazed it. Blazed it.

**Sydnee:**

... I'm just saying, it was probably not the worst idea. It was the smoking part that was not so great.

**Justin:**

Okay. I, I, even I wouldn't have known that one. Old Indian dudes.

**Sydnee:**

But the early Americans took it a step further. Um, they said, you know, in India, they wanna smoke some jimson weed, well let's just smoke. Let's just smoke tobacco. That just seems like, that should work, probably.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

Like, "I like that better."

**Justin:**

Yeah, it tastes better, and feels good.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, "I'd rather just smoke that." So they would, they would actually just smoke cigarettes.

**Justin:**

Okay. That's not... You're not dreaming anything—

**Sydnee:**

No.

**Justin:**

... Fellas?

**Sydnee:**

But it seemed good.

**Justin:**

It didn't. They were lying, but okay.

**Sydnee:**

They also advised smoking cocaine.

**Justin:**

Okay, well now I do feel better. [laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. Um, as a, as a treatment for asthma. And that was both... As a treatment for asthma or as a treatment for a cold. Again, these would be used for any kind of breathing issues. So just maybe—

**Justin:**

Or is it meant for getting uh, blocked on your navel. That it's good for that too. I mean what can't cocaine fix?

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] The treatment for sleepy.

**Justin:**

Back, treatment for bad party.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs]

**Justin:**

No matter what problem, cocaine is the answer. Too much disposable income? Cocaine is there.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] Later, arsenic became a popular treatment.

**Justin:**

Okay? Sure.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know.

**Justin:**



Just bury a knife in your chest.

**Sydnee:**

We're moving into that period of time where anything that evokes any response in the human body, "Well, let's try it."

**Justin:**

Let's give it a whirl.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, there was a physician working out of Spain who noticed uh, association with the time of the year, like the weather.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

And that was where we first started to get the idea that a dry climate would probably help with respiratory illness. And we, we saw that with tuberculosis, but also with any kinds of asthma, cold, whatever, that cold wet weather was worse, dry climates are better. And he also threw in there, "You should rest, and don't have any sex, and drink some chicken soup."

**Justin:**

Okay, sure.

**Sydnee:**

Not, not a bad idea if you've got like a cold or something.

**Justin:**

You'll feel better.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, in the 1500s, there's an interesting footnote in the history of allergies, there was an archbishop who was severely ill with many respiratory symptoms, and he was actually diagnosed with tuberculosis, and no physician could help him. Everything they tried to do wasn't making him better, until one of his doctors advised that he switched from his feather bed to all silk. Now, the reasoning was actually kind of shallow. "Wouldn't a man of your stature be sleeping on silk, and not feathers?"

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

But it totally cured what turned out to be just an allergy too.

**Justin:**

That's so awesome. I love that we're backed into a right answer.

**Sydnee:**

Whatever. Yep. Uh, but, I will say that the physician did take note of that. There was a recognition like, "Ah, okay, those feathers were clearly the problem. We didn't know it, but we know that the feathers were a problem."

**Justin:**

No, maybe he's just like finally, because of his status, his status is what was making him sick. His sense of, of the finer things in life. So it was keeping him ill, and finally, he was sleeping on a class appropriate bed, and that's why he started to breathe a little easier.

**Sydnee:**

And that's all it takes.

**Justin:**

I tried to sleep on an air mattress, and I started, I coughed up a lung, 'cause I'm a fancy gentleman. I can't, I can't be caught dead on an air mattress.

**Sydnee:**

I'm always trying to sleep on that, what is that weird pillow that I sleep on that you got? It's got water in it or something?

**Justin:**

Yeah, yeah. I don't know why you still use that. I thought it would stay cool, but it doesn't really.

**Sydnee:**

No it doesn't. Uh, laziness? I don't know where my other pillow is, and I'd have to go find it, and I'd have to put it on the bed, and—

**Justin:**

Yeah, that's a whole production.

**Sydnee:**

... Oh, we got a kid now. I just don't have time for that.

**Justin:**

I didn't think you disliked that pillow.

**Sydnee:**

No, I hate it.

**Justin:**

Really?

**Sydnee:**

Like, yeah, 'cause it like flops around. It's like heavy. And if I tried to just pull it, like I've pulled it down, and it, I don't know.

**Justin:**

Do you want me to just get you a normal pillow?

**Sydnee:**

Uh, yeah, I really need a normal pillow.

**Justin:**

Okay, next time I'm out I'll get you a normal pillow, sorry.

**Sydnee:**

Did we throw away my normal pillow?

**Justin:**

It's certainly, certainly, certainly we did. Probably.

**Sydnee:**

Oh man.

**Justin:**

We got like 50 pillows though... Oh my God, this is a podcast. Sorry, go ahead.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] So, continuing things that are thrilling, there was a big breakthrough in the 1800s when John Bostock, a physician wrote a description of hay fever.

**Justin:**

The uh—

**Sydnee:**

That was probably as fun to read as our—

**Justin:**

... No coward. No coward play I'm assuming.

**Sydnee:**

... As our pillow discussion was to just listen to. Um, he was a sufferer of hay fever, and, you know, allergies are no fun, and so, I guess he just was finally like, "Man, I'm just gonna write all this down, and see if I can like define this, and describe it, and then maybe if we all agree that there is a thing that is triggered by stuff in the environment that is a problem, maybe then we can fix it." And he linked it to some sort of substance in the air.

**Justin:**

Just writing about his own stuff?

**Sydnee:**

Yes, writing about his own symptoms of hay fever.

**Justin:**

"This summer at CW. The asthma diaries."

**Sydnee:**

Do you think there was a vampire in there too?

**Justin:**

Vampires gave us asthma. I mean, that's science 101, in the book.

**Sydnee:**

But allergies came from mummies, and we know that now.

**Justin:**

We know that now.

**Sydnee:**

Uh, this was, this was important. This sounds like the most boring thing ever, but it was important because the, the most popular belief still at the

time, even though it had been proposed otherwise obviously was that heat caused problems.

And so, the idea that, "Oh no, no, there are these things in the environment, they definitely, definitely do." 'cause he was a very respected physician, this was the first time that people started reading this description of hay fever, and going, "Oh okay. Well maybe this is right. I buy this." And other physicians began to build on this work actually testing the theory, so they started injecting themselves with pollen and rubbing it all over their skin, and rubbing it in their eyes, and trying to trigger symptoms to prove the theory.

**Justin:**

It's heroic I guess.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. I mean, and it worked. They did. They gave themselves terrible allergic symptoms.

**Justin:**

It's a cold few weeks, but I guess it all pays off in the end.

**Sydnee:**

I don't think any of them went into like anaphylactic shock that I read about, which is nice. That's good.

**Justin:**

Oh, who would write that up? They would probably give that guy a pass. It's a rough way to go.

**Sydnee:**

You know somebody would write it up.

**Justin:**

I guarantee you.

**Sydnee:**

If I did it, if I was that doctor, and I injected myself with something, and triggered anaphylactic shock, and then I presumably am surviving, if I'm gonna write it up, you know I would.

**Justin:**

Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

'Cause I think I was so cool.

**Justin:**

So cool, except for giving herself anaphylactic shock.

**Sydnee:**

[laughs] For, in science. For the name of sci—we did a whole show about, you know, doctors think that's cool.

**Justin:**

Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So, the following century, what really was the breakthrough for allergies, and asthma, and complaints similar to those was immunizations. Uh, not because they fix these problems, but because this is really when we started to understand the immune system. So as we understood the immune system better, we understood the idea that for some people, there are things in the environment that their immune system just goes nuts to, and we don't know, you know, exactly why this person, every time they come in contact with, you know, pollen, they can't breathe for two weeks, and this other person doesn't seem to notice.

**Justin:**

Do we understand that now? Like, I mean, obviously on a basal we do, but like the why?

**Sydnee:**

I mean, part of it is like, it's, you know, we started to understand genetics, right?

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Why some people are, you know, have different diseases, and other people don't. But then the other thing too, there are all kinds of theories, and I mean, this is just me kind of talking about it, but there, there's something called the hygiene hypothesis.

**Justin:**

Mm.

**Sydnee:**

That a lot of this is, a lot of these problems are becoming more prominent as we're getting cleaner.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

We're not exposed to allergens, things that would trigger these problems early enough, so we, we're too clean basically.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

If we were all dirtier, and more covered in germs and allergens at an earlier age, we wouldn't, we wouldn't have so many people with allergies and asthma.

**Justin:**

Huh.

**Sydnee:**

I don't know. I'm not saying that that's necessarily true, but that is a popular hypothesis. So, don't take so many showers?

**Justin:**

I tested that hypothesis a lot in middle school. [laughing]

**Sydnee:**

Well, it didn't work. You got Thanksgiving asthma.

**Justin:**

Tragic Thanksgiving asthma.

**Sydnee:**

So, one other thing I think, you know, we kind of talked about smoking as a cure for asthma.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

One really popular treatment—

**Justin:**

Highly effective cure for asthma.

**Sydnee:**

... [laughs], in the, in the UK, and then in the US. And this was again kind of in the patent medicine era where asthma cigarettes.

**Justin:**

Awesome.

**Sydnee:**

So not just cigarettes, 'cause we talked about that. Those are ones with actually tobacco in them. These did not have tobacco. They were specifically for asthma. They were marketed that way. It was like potter's asthma cigarettes.

**Justin:**

If you need a name for your band, now you have it.

**Sydnee:**

There you go.

**Justin:**

Asthma cigarette. The Asthma Cigarettes.

**Sydnee:**

They, they usually did have an herb in them of some sort, and they, there was some basis here. They contain some kind of herb that would have atropine in it. Atropine again, acting as a, an anticholinergic that would dilate your airways, it open up your airways, mildly. This is probably not the best way to do this, but they did work somewhat. Uh, belladonna was a very popular thing to put in asthma cigarettes. So they kind of worked, but at the same time, they also probably made you hallucinate somewhat.

**Justin:**



Okay.

**Sydnee:**

So they were fun cigarettes.

**Justin:**

Whee.

**Sydnee:**

They were jazz cigarettes.

**Justin:**

I'm not worried about my asthma ever.

**Sydnee:**

Um, they were very popular, you can imagine, because one, people love smoking back then, right?

**Justin:**

Sure.

**Sydnee:**

Like, everybody was smoking.

**Justin:**

And they could fix anything.

**Sydnee:**

Yes. It could fix anything. It may have dilated your airways, and moreover, you are tripping on 'em, so everybody loved 'em, people were getting hooked on 'em. Um, which is why they continued to be popular, even after the nebulizer was invented.

**Justin:**

[laughs] Really?

**Sydnee:**

Do you know what a nebulizer is?

**Justin:**

I know.

**Sydnee:**

I think most people do, but.

**Justin:**

It has a little thing, a little—

**Sydnee:**

Like breathing treatments.

**Justin:**

... Yeah.

**Sydnee:**

If you've ever seen a little kid, they get the little... There's the machine, and you dump the albuterol liquid and the thing.

**Justin:**

Right.

**Sydnee:**

And they get the treatment, anyway. Even after the nebulizer was invented in the '30s, they were still smoking asthma cigarettes. It wasn't really until the '50s when the inhaler came out, which was cheaper, and easier to use, and everybody understood it, and it works so much better than smoking that people started to use that instead of the cigarettes. But they sold those up until like '85.

**Justin:**

Holy crap.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, you could find packs of asthma cigarettes. There are probably people listening who are like, "Hey, I remember. Somebody told me about those." Um, I read one comment about 'em, somebody who was talking about asthma cigarettes and said, "You know, actually I was around, and I tried those." And uh, he said, it wasn't a particularly nice buzz, but very, very debilitating.

**Justin:**

[laughs]

**Sydnee:**

Which was an endorsement, I think.

**Justin:**

Awesome. Awesome.

**Sydnee:**

I think it was an endorsement.

**Justin:**

Awesome.

**Sydnee:**

Um, the last sidetrack before we get to today was that in the 1900s, especially in like the '30s and up to the '50s, asthma became viewed as a psychosomatic illness for a while.

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

They didn't think that it was, it was really a physical problem, it was something that you could probably overcome with the right amount of talk therapy, and like psychoanalysis.

**Justin:**

Is that why we have some of the like unfortunate stereotypes like, connecting people with asthma to like being sort of nerdy, or effeminate, or whatever?

**Sydnee:**

I think that's exactly where it came from. Back in the '50s, when, if you were carrying around... Think about it, we have an overlap where asthma is still being seen as something that is primarily of the mind, and then at the same time the inhaler was invented. So now you've got kids wandering around using an inhaler, and there are adults looking at them going, "Oh, that kid just needs to be in therapy."

**Justin:**

Mm-hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So yeah, I think that's probably where that unfortunate connection comes from. Um, they thought that wheezing was the suppressed cry of a child for its mother. That's why you wheeze.

**Justin:**

Mm.

**Sydnee:**

It's because you're really just crying for mom, and you don't know how. It was considered that there were seven holy psychosomatic illnesses at the time.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

I think that might be another show altogether. But anyway, the way that they treated it was by treating the underline depression that they thought was there.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

Which obviously does not fix asthma.

**Justin:**

No, that doesn't fix your asthma. What about now, Syd?

**Sydnee:**

Well now, we understand that they are distinct illnesses. Asthma, of course. Uh, allergies to various substances, and then all kinds of other respiratory problems that were lumped in with this stuff. Um, asthma has a wide variety of treatments, inhalers, pills, you know, you can go see a specialist if you need to.

Allergies are very well understood. Uh, we can treat you for them with over the counter medication, or prescription medication, and um, we can also test you, much in the same way that those doctors who just rub pollen over

themselves, we can test you with line skin tests, like, you know, expose you to a bunch of stuff to try and figure out what you're allergic to.

**Justin:**

Hmm.

**Sydnee:**

So. So it's all very well understood and, and we can treat them now, but.

**Justin:**

What a relief.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah.

**Justin:**

So should my Thanksgiving asthma flare up again, doctors will be there to treat me.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah. And in the meantime, I'll just keep taking my loratadine, because it is the time of the year that... Again, everything everyone around here has allergies. Our air quality is just terrible.

**Justin:**

Hey, uh, folks, thank you so much for listening. Thank you to people tweeting out the show. Uh, using the, uh, @sawbones is our, is our username where you can use Sawbones hash tag, whatever you want. A lot of people getting their flu shots.

**Sydnee:**

Yeah, thank you. Everybody getting their flu shot.

**Justin:**

Jazzy723 got hers. Other people tweeting about the show, Will Krimble, uh, Vanessa Fanalstine, Jeff Flakin, uh, RecoveringNinjaCat, Nick Taylor, uh, Jedi Outcast, RhymeCop, Doogy2K, Williams, SkeebyNicks, IHeartSocialMedia, Brian Russels, Patricia Mateevy, uh, FunBustin, and so many others.

Uh, uh, listen, if you're gonna be in the area of Huntington, West Virginia on December 21st, then we got news for you. We are doing a live show uh, with My Brother, My Brother, and Me, uh, called, My Brother, My Brother and Me,

Home for the Candles: A Holiday Spectacular. It's gonna be at Huntington City Hall. Uh, we're gonna be recording a live episode and opening up for My Brother, My Brother and Me. Tickets are just 15 bucks. Uh, we would about half of them, a little over half actually, so get on it if you, uh, are, are interested in going. You can go to [bit.ly/candlenightslive](http://bit.ly/candlenightslive). And get those uh, get those tickets, so hop on that.

**Sydnee:**

This is your chance to see Huntington, West Virginia.

**Justin:**

You've been—you've waited long enough. Treat yourself.

**Sydnee:**

It's, just cross that right off that bucket list and get on down here.

**Justin:**

We're a member of the Maximum Fun Podcast Network. There's a lot of great shows, uh, for you to, to listen to there. Uh, uh, this week, I wanna recommend The Goosedown, a hilarious podcast that uh, you would uh, you would really enjoy. So the general topics, uh, but uh, are really hysterical. So uh, treat yourself to that. Those, those two are hilarious. And I wanna thank you so much for listening.

**Sydnee:**

Thanks to The Taxpayers.

**Justin:**

Oh yeah, for letting us use their song, Medicines, as our intro and outro music. Should go buy everything they make. And finally, thanks to you so much for listening. We'll be with you next Tuesday. Until then, I'm Justin McElroy.

**Sydnee:**

I'm Sydnee McElroy.

**Justin:**

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

[theme music plays]

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