

Sawbones 530: Apple Cider Vinegar

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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 cohost, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: I informed Sydnee briefly before recording started that I was hungry and she informed me that I would have to wait until after we recorded our podcast for me to have any yummy tummy tempters.

Sydnee: That's right, Justin.

Justin: So that's where I'm at, that's where you find me, that's the emotional state you find me, Sydnee. That's why I'm spittin' about it.

Sydnee: Don't you perform better, like I always thought it's that thing where before you go onstage, you should have to pee just a little.

Justin: Yeah. Oh of course, yeah we—

Sydnee: So be just a little hungry, a little thirsty, have to pee just a little.

Justin: They told us to do that in auditions, you would have like save it, you wouldn't pee and then— But like I guess I have a different relationship with food than you do, Sydnee. For me, food isn't just sustenance and a way of like breaking bread and community, for my food is medicine.

Sydnee: Oh no.

Justin: And I'm sorry but like the sunshine comes from the sun and they make it into the vegetables, and then you eat sunshine, and like that medicine, you know what I mean? For me, food is medicine, like cures like, I eat cauliflower which looks like my brain, and it make me smarter. So, food is medicine, and—

Sydnee: And it make me smarter?

Justin: And it make-a me smarter.

Sydnee: [chuckles] Justin, food is not medicine, food is food, but food is great.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Medicine is great.

Justin: Medicine looks like candy. Explain. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Not all— No. Mm-mm.

Justin: Many medicine look like candy. Hmm, candy food, interesting. Hmm.

Sydnee: Yeah. So, we watched a series.

Justin: The documentary.

Sydnee: Well it wasn't a documentary.

Justin: About how food is medicine. [giggles] Sorry, I should mention—

Sydnee: No.

Justin: — I got all the wrong messages. I'm sorry.

Sydnee: We watched a TV series, it's a dramatized version of a true story. To— What do they say? It's a true story of a lie.

Justin: Yeah, true story of a lie is how they pitch it.

Sydnee: Yes, it's called *Apple Cider Vinegar*. There's actually, you know Justin, since we started watching it and decided to do a show on it, we've— there's several listeners who have since emailed and said, "You guys should watch this series."

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: So thank you, but we already were, we were too fast.

Justin: We already did.

Sydnee: We were too quick.

Justin: We were there already. I gotta say, this is one the algorithm did get pretty quickly on us.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: They clocked us, they clocked this on pretty good. You got us.

Sydnee: It's interesting because it is not very much about apple cider vinegar.

Justin: It's really not that much about it at all.

Sydnee: No, which is a whole thing, as we've talked about on the show before, in the wellness world. Well we did a whole show on vinegar.

Justin: Sure. I think we did apple cider. I'm pretty sure we did. Did we not?

Sydnee: Well, we talked about vinegar and I think we focused— Apple cider vinegar tends to be the vinegar people like the most in the wellness world.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I think it's 'cause it sounds pleasant.

Justin: Yeah, and it like apple, mm good. Yeah.

Sydnee: It is, as we talked about, if you're concerned about the vinegary properties being the healthy properties, apple cider vinegar is a weaker vinegar than a lot of other vinegars you may choose.

Justin: Oh no.

Sydnee: That's on the apple cider vinegar episode though.

Justin: [chuckles] Oh no.

Sydnee: What?

Justin: [laughs] Okay, we're recording this episode about *Apple Cider Vinegar*, the TV series, and I am very much looking forward to it. In the process of recording this episode, by which I mean right now in this moment, I'm remembering that yesterday the toilet was clogged.

And I dumped a bunch of baking soda and vinegar into it to unclog it. You're supposed to let that sit for 30 minutes and then flush it, and I didn't!

Sydnee: So it's just still there?

Justin: It's still there, Syd. Aw, dangnabbit. [wheezes]

Sydnee: Oh, okay.

Justin: Aw beans, that's gonna be a whole kerfuffle up there. Aw man.

Sydnee: Listen, we got like 27 minutes before you get to address this, okay?

Justin: I mean, if 24 hours hasn't done anything—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: — what's 27 more minutes gonna do?

Sydnee: So—

Justin: Just can you not let me forget? [chuckles]

Sydnee: I won't let you forget.

Justin: Thank you.

Sydnee: It's in there now.

Justin: [chuckles]

Sydnee: *Apple Cider Vinegar* is the story—

Justin: Aw man. [chuckles]

Sydnee: — of a real-life person, Belle Gibson, who started a wellness... app?

Justin: Movement.

Sydnee: And movement, would you say?

Justin: Yeah. Community.

Sydnee: Yes, community.

Justin: Family? Can I say family? It felt like we were all a part of the family, didn't it?

Sydnee: Based on a cancer diagnosis that she did not in fact have.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: She told the world that she had cured herself of a malignant brain tumor using a healthy diet.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And then shared the healthy diet with the world via an app and a cookbook.

Justin: Yup.

Sydnee: And then was discovered to be a fraud.

Justin: Mm. How were you thinking— Before we get into like the nuts and bolts of this whole story, how were you thinking of structuring this discussion, Syd? Do we wanna talk— think about this as a miniseries first and a true story second? Or how do you wanna go through this?

Sydnee: I kinda wanted to talk about the sort of different archetypes within the wellness world—

Justin: Mmm.

Sydnee: — that are well represented, I think—

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: — by this TV series. And I also wanted to discuss why is this so effective? I thought it was real— Okay, this is what really made me wanna talk about this. I was scrolling through TikTok and I saw on some sort of red-carpet event where they were talking to some of the stars of this series about “Do you think someone could pull off a fraud of this level today?”

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: With the internet the way it is, in the year 2025.

Justin: Oh yeah.

Sydnee: Could somebody do this?

Justin: For sure, yeah.

Sydnee: Well it was really interesting ‘cause some of the celebrities said, “No, like we’d figure it out immediately.”

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: “We’d all like do our internet sleuthing, and...”

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: "We'd know."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And there were several that made the counter argument, which I think I would agree with, which is "Oh, I think it's easier than ever."

Justin: Mm, yeah. I think yes. In terms of sca— I mean just to start out, I feel like AI right now would make it a lot easier to falsify, you know, medical documents, which is a place to start now.

Sydnee: Well and I think that there is a... an understandable distrust of authority in all realms, and I think that has bled over to the scientific and medical community. And I think a lot of that is intertwined with our basic distrust of the American healthcare system, which is well-founded.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And so I think— But I think that's all very understandable, and important to talk about if we're gonna move forward in a way where we want people to know truth.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And make good decisions based on scientific truth and evidence.

Justin: I was really impressed, to think of this as like a TV series first, I think if you are a— if you're a *Sawbones* fan, and— I think a lot of this is going to seem familiar to you in the archetypal sense. I think that you're gonna see sort of like many narratives throughout this that you are going to be familiar with.

Like some of this probably won't come as so shocking to you, a big part of it is seeing sort of the... exposing the tools and sort of scams that some of these like health influencers are using, and I think that's something that we talk about a lot on the show. But I think it does a really...

It does a really humane job, I think, of looking at all of these different perspectives without necessarily trying to— I mean it knows who the villain is, but it's not necessarily trying to... lay the blame on this one

person. I think it is recognizing that there is a system that has created this persona and this whole problem, rather than just this one bad apple.

Sydnee: Right, and we can simultaneously recognize that a system has created a problem, and address that system and try to improve and make it better, but still hold the person accountable for the things they did.

Justin: Yes, 100%.

Sydnee: And I think, you know, because... lying to people about curing cancer is a bad thing to do.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: I just feel like I need [chuckles] to preface with that, so.

Justin: Oh, you need to say that, okay yeah.

Sydnee: Well, I mean I guess if you find yourself—

Justin: I mean I guess you've never explicitly said that.

Sydnee: — at moments, feeling some sort of sympathy for the main character. I mean I— 'cause at times I think you're supposed to feel a little bad for her.

I still think it's important to know that what she did caused harm. Because there were people who saw that as an alternative to tradi— to actual cancer treatments, and perhaps pursued them, to their own, you know, unfortunate outcomes.

Justin: So, super quick, before we get into talking about the details of the show itself. We will probably talk about what happens on this Netflix series, so if you have not watched it yet, you may wanna, you know, come back.

And like I said, this is based on true events, so I don't know how spoilery it can be, but if you can— if you care. In the TV series, we follow, I would say... sort of three main arcs. Is that accurate? Maybe three or four depending on how you wanna count it.

Sydnee: Yeah, I really wanna contrast the two main wellness bloggers though.

Justin: Yeah. Do you wanna talk about— We talked about Belle Gibson, do you wanna talk about the other sort of like big—

Sydnee: Yeah, so—

Justin: — big wellness?

Sydnee: Belle Gibson is very much— she... whether she believe she has cancer or not I can't speak to, I'm not in her head. But she does not, and she is pretending she does, and then trying to promote a brand based on that. The other character, Milla Blake, does indeed have cancer. She is not—

Justin: She is fictional, it's worth noting, right?

Sydnee: She is a fictional character. She's—

Justin: She's a fictionalized composite of real things.

Sydnee: Yes, she's based on actual people, but she is not an— There is no Milla Blake. So she does have cancer, and does not want to go the route that the oncologists and her team of physicians who actually, you know, study and understand and are giving her evidence-based recommendations, she doesn't wanna go that route because it involves amputating her arm.

So she finds alternative therapies that make her feel more empowered, and make her feel more in control of her body, and so she chooses to go that direction. And I think what's important to contrast is that Belle Gibson is one force we see in sort of that like pseudoscientific alternative medicine world, where she's trying to get attention, and fame, and money.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: That's it.

Justin: Yup.

Sydney: She— I— And I'm— Maybe she thinks her food's great, I don't know, but there is a very clear...

Justin: And it leaves the— it leaves— Oh, I know I'm gonna say this improperly, so... It leaves the door open for the fact that this is a— She may believe it or she may not, but like it's not— I would say the show doesn't explicitly say these are all crafted manipulations, this is all— It leaves room for the idea that this is maybe a mind that is not functioning properly.

Sydney: Right. Well and I think, you know they kinda traced the history of her as somebody who even since— And I don't know if this is true about the actual human, this is the narrative in the fictionalized story, is that even as a younger person, she would sort of claim illnesses. Like she has a fake heart attack at one point.

There are things that happen as a way of dealing with emotional stress and emotional problems. She displays physical symptoms. And I think what's really important about that is that we live in a world that still does not allow a lot of space.

Justin: Right

Sydney: For psychological illness to be recognized and cared for and legitimized in the same way that physical illness is. And so manifesting a psychological illness as a physical one in order for other people to pay attention to it, I think we can understand that, right?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydney: Like we can see that and see "Ah, I see why that would happen."

Justin: Yes.

Sydney: Now obviously that doesn't mean we should build a fake cancer cure off of it, but I understand how we get there. The other character represents I think the other force that exists in the— sort of the alternative medicine, pseudoscience world, which is the true believer.

Justin: Mm.

Sydney: Somebody who really, heartfelt, genuinely believes that they have found a better, safer way, and they wanna share it with the world. And I think that it's important to understand that both exist.

Justin: Yes.

Sydney: And the tools they use are different, and one can be a lot harder, I think, to combat and dismantle than the other.

Justin: I will also say it's interesting because the show really does put them on trial separately, I think.

Sydney: Mm-hmm.

Justin: It doesn't conflate the two, I think. Milla's story is much more— I think it's a little bit softer, it's told in a more soft perspective, it's not quite as like hyperkinetic in the way it's being shot and expressed. Like the editing on Belle's scenes is so fast, chop chop chop chop chop. You see this mind that is constantly like grinding.

Milla's scenes are a little bit more complacent, they're a little bit more like chill, you feel like this is real thing she's living with. But... it's not like— it's not showing you a good and bad, right? It's not like, "You know, there's actually a positive side to this too," because Milla is also put under the microscope, right.

You see how her choices affect for example her mom, who decides not to pursue traditional cancer treatment, and likely dies earlier as a result of that. So I think the— it makes you have to deal with her choices too. You see the effect that Milla's choices are having.

Sydney: Yes. And I think in that sense, both of our— And I think that's really important to recognize, both of these people have illness.

Justin: Mm. Mm-hmm.

Sydney: Now the illness that Milla has is one that we can see, and we can test for, and we understand a lot more clearly. The illness that Belle Gibson has, I mean which— I—

I'm not gonna sit here and diagnose her, I'm not her doctor, but I think to... lie and mislead to that degree as she does in the series, I don't know about the real human, but the character in the series, it seems like this character in the series has some sort of mental health condition.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That guides her to do these things, right.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And I think that's important to say because again, part of I think what we're supposed to believe in the series is that the lack of recognition for that, the lack of help and treatment and care and consideration and understanding society has for mental illness.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Leads to this.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Not always of course, most of the time never, but I think that's part of the story.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And I will say there is— You know, there are obviously like— there's a journalist who is seeking to uncover it, there's family members, there's friends. There's also, you alluded to a third story, which I think is important, which is someone who has been diagnosed with cancer, is going through traditional treatments, but is also being influenced.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: By these bloggers.

Justin: Both of them.

Sydnee: Both of them.

Justin: In turn, yes.

Sydnee: And trying to decide the best way for herself to incorporate the— how attractive these ideas are.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: I mean you see it, you see her being lured in as she is sitting and undergoing chemotherapy, as she is becoming sicker from the treatments she's undergoing for her cancer. She is looking at these beautiful pictures of health and wellness portrayed by these bloggers, and I think that it is so obvious why someone would be drawn to that.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: When you see that come— I mean, don't you think so? Like they— It's so visually contrasted.

Justin: It is— There— It's just you saying it really hits it home, but there is a— It's almost like a fetishization of vitality, you know what I mean? It's like, "I have this and you do not."

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Like, "This is available to you for money, or—" Although they don't make Milla explicitly about trying to get money, that is not her goal clearly.

Sydnee: No.

Justin: But you do see the effect, I think, that it is having not just on them but the people around them. You see like for instance Belle's family try to... You see how they sort of like in— have to incorporate her stories into their lives, and the extent to which they have to like believe and not believe these stories, just to like get by day to day.

Sydnee: Yeah, her partner really— You see her having to do a lot of— I mean I don't know if he ever believes her or not.

Justin: Yeah, it's like a lot of mental—

Sydnee: But he decides to a lot.

Justin: Mental jujitsu. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: You know, that he's doing on himself, right.

Sydnee: Well and I do think that, like you said, it is not clear does— Like Milla's character is not portrayed as being after money, or attempting to perpetuate a fraud. She genuinely thinks she's found an answer.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: But then there is harm done by that, and that's— I think that's well represented for both characters.

Justin: We also see, I think it's interesting, the way that the medical community is portrayed in each of their stories is very different.

You get in Milla's story, it is a very cold like— the sort of almost like a cartoonish version of like the cold, calculating medical industrial complex, telling her that the arm has to come off and that's just what the numbers say, and there's no debate about this.

And like it's funny watching it, they clearly want you to kinda see from her perspective. I think we've been doing this show for long enough that that is absolutely unfazing me. [chuckles] It does not faze me at all, I'm like, "Yup, well yeah, you heard 'em, you heard the weird cold body of medicine, they say it's gotta come off man. Just trust 'em, just go for it, just do it."

Sydnee: That's—

Justin: "Don't screw around." [chuckles]

Sydnee: Well and I think that's why it is important though to watch something like this as a healthcare provider and understand it, is that in my mind if you look at me and say, "You've got this kind of cancer in your

arm, it hasn't spread any further yet. If we cut your arm off, odds are it won't spread and you're going to live."

Justin: I wouldn't even let you make it through the sentence.

Sydnee: Right, like the— And so the way that the doctors are portrayed as being very much just like, "It's your arm or your life, what's the—?"

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I mean, I get it. Like I'm—

Justin: But there is no sensitivity being put forth. Which again, that's stylization, right? Like that's heightened for TV, but I think that it is a helpful way of like I think this show does a really, really admirable job of trying at least to show several different perspectives without really leaning too hard on one.

Which I think it succeeds in, in part because I felt like there are parts where I was kinda feeling like, "Alright, come on. Like we do not need to be this sympathetic, right. We can be a little bit harder." But I think that like that's probably a good sign that they're striking a good balance.

Sydnee: I wanna— Justin, I wanna get into a little bit of the nitty gritty of what the two characters like... what they are proposing as their cancer cures.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: I think that's useful for our show.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But before we do that, we gotta go to the Billing Department.

Justin: Alright, let's go.

[transition theme music plays]

[ad break]

Justin: Well Sydnee, I'm ready to change my whole vibration.

Sydnee: So, first of all, Belle Gibson is basically just promoting a really healthy diet.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: I mean more or less, that is...

Justin: Full of all those words that don't mean anything. "Clean, organic, non-GMO," more nonsense.

Sydnee: She talks about there's a scene where she is diagnosed using some sort of machine with some shady doctor in a... a warehouse.

Justin: It's really shady. [chuckles]

Sydnee: He like hooks her up to electrodes, and it's like, "I can sense—"

Justin: His name is Dr. Nick, and he very much reminds me of Dr. Nick from *The Simpsons*.

Sydnee: I thought his name was Dr. Phil.

[pause]

Justin: I don't— Is it Dr. Phil? You would know.

Sydnee: I thought it was Dr. Phil.

Justin: Okay, you would know better than I am. I was thinking Dr. Nick from *The*— Maybe it was because of his office that I was thinking Dr....

Sydnee: So there really was like Belle Gibson really did say at one point—

Justin: Sorry yes, you're right. Dr. Phil. [chuckles]

Sydnee: That there was a doctor who used some sort of quote "German technology" to check frequencies and found evidence of cancer in her

body. That... That is like... I couldn't— I was trying to find like a corollary, where's the fake medicine thing that's stemming from?

There are a lot of things like that out there, so I don't think this is necessarily pointing to one specific... You know, there are a lot of those sort of monitors that they use—

Justin: Sure.

Sydnee: — to try to tell like... are you suffering from EMF damage and things like that. So there's that. The diet she's proposing— And she— In the Netflix series, she'll use like, "It's a European/German/Russian/—" Basically just anywhere but here protocol.

Justin: Right, it's the old— My dad used to call it the 500-mile rule. It's for— Like if someone worked in a field 500 miles or more away, then they're automatically an expert. I think that that's absolutely with like... the further away the better, right?

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: Because it's that plea to exotic, like you know, "This has gotta work 'cause it's from [chuckles] from so far away."

Sydnee: And I think part of how they show— part of how they— the show attempts to prove that she is knowingly perpetuating a fraud, which I don't know. Again, I have no idea about the real life human.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: I am talking about within the fictionalized—

Justin: Just in the show.

Sydnee: — version of the show.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Is that while she is promoting this very healthy— I mean it's like gluten free, sugar free, you know, low— Well an— Anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, low—

Justin: The whole bit, yeah, the whole thing, yeah.

Sydnee: All the usual buzz words that we throw out there. As she is promoting this diet, we also see her like drinking alcohol, and occasionally smoking cigarettes, or like using drugs, or—

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: — eating chip at one point. You know, like we see her engaging in activities that are not in line with this diet she's promoting.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: What Milla is using I believe is Gerson therapy.

Justin: Is it a real... protocol they keep talking about?

Sydnee: Yes, Max Gerson developed this back in the early 1900s, like in the 1930s, and this was a therapy as a way initially to treat migraine headaches and then tuberculosis, and then it was one of those cure-alls that got expanded to anything that ails you, right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And so the idea is that there are changes in our cells related to toxins. This is like— It's toxins.

Justin: Toxins.

Sydnee: Everything causes toxins, and so we need ways to cleans our bodies of these toxins, because our liver is so busy it can't get them all out.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And so anyway, the things we see the character of Milla doing are actually pretty classic Gerson therapy. Like you drink 13 glasses of juice a day, it has to be organic.

Justin: Of course.

Sydnee: They should be every hour

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: So like every hour you're awake, you're drinking a freshly juiced glass of fruit and vegetable, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: It is a vegetarian pretty much diet.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Fruit, vegetable, grains.

Justin: That's unsurprising, it would be wild if they were like, "And then wrap every day up with delicious cheeseburger."

Sydnee: [chuckles] There are a ton of supplements, and I'm certain that different proponents of whatever Gerson therapy has become in different places throughout the world now— Because I mean that's the thing, like you see the roots of this like juicing and taking supplements. How many diets echo this?

Justin: Yeah, I mean it's—

Sydnee: How many—

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And I'm saying "diet," by the way. How many wellness regiments/diets/— Because it all gets—

Justin: It's all the same thing.

Sydnee: It's all in the same place now, right.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Like you look at wellness bloggers who will at the same time tell you how to be your healthiest self and lose weight, as if those two things are automatically linked.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Which we know they're not. And then the other part of it are enemas. Coffee or chamomile enemas.

Justin: These two are really enemas that, you know—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: — early on they're friends, but throughout the show their relationship kinda falls apart, and they become enemas. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Do you enjoy your enema joke?

Justin: That was stu— No, it's stupid. It wasn't even a joke, I'm sorry Syd. [chuckles]

Sydnee: There is no— As you may imagine... there are no studies that have ever indicated that this will treat or cure cancer, or anything to my knowledge.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: But certainly not cancer. It does not mean that those sorts of things aren't continually promoted by a lot of different— Again, a lot of different like wellness type people today.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But that is the therapy that they are demonstrating I think pretty well on the show. I mean that sounds pretty close to what we see the characters—

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: — in the Netflix special do.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: We see like— I— And the Lucy character, who is the woman who actually has cancer, who is following these two wellness influencers.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And who is struggling with what the best thing for her to do is also pursues kind of a third sort of natural therapy.

Justin: Yeah, that's weird. That one's in the— It's sort of like an unrelated, I think, sort of— She seems like doing kind of a sweat lodge thing a little bit.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: It's kind of like a retreat back to nature sort of deal she's doing.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: It seems like she's doing drugs, she's maybe doing some.

Sydnee: I believe she's on some sort of hallucinogenic.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Yes. And kinda goes on some sort of journey.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: Of the soul.

Justin: [chuckles] Yeah.

Sydnee: [chuckles] As like a third path. But I think what's so important is, first of all, as you're watching this broken down, it— I feel like it is really clear to the viewer, as you're seeing these people undergo enema after enema after enema, and drinking glass of juice after glass of juice, I feel like it seems so obvious that that won't cure cancer.

Justin: Yes. I think what's interesting about her story is that it doesn't seem to be that interested in whether or not it's curing her, but it is... but how she is processing what is happening to her. And I think that that's...

Inevitably, like I think that's what the show is most interested in, is like how do you handle this? Like how are you— Can— How do you handle this in a way that doesn't hurt other people, I think. You know what I mean? Like how are you processing it and how do these other voices get into your head?

Sydnee: Right, and I think there's also a really useful part where she is realizing her tumors are not responding to what she's been doing, she goes into sort of like a crunchy shop.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: It looks like they sell like, I don't know, it's like hippie stuff, and natural things. To try to get her juices sold there.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And while she's there, the person behind the counter is like, "Ooo, try my black salve for this," and sells her.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: A new—

Justin: It's so— It's like a reverse— She like does the... the full Nelson—

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: — reverse like yeah.

Sydnee: Again, I like the way it's all portrayed because you're seeing all of the differences. There are people out there who try to take advantage of the desperate, and there are people out there who genuinely think they've figured something out and wanna share it.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And then there's a lot in between. And getting tied up in the morality of it all doesn't really help us, right.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Because here's the truth. It is so obvious in that show why the way that the sort of medical system is portrayed is so unattractive to these patients.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Because one, when it comes specifically to cancer, our treatments are— they're unattractive to think about, right?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: When they say like, "Chemotherapy is poison." Well there— it— Many chemotherapy agents are very toxic to your body in other ways.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: This is a truth. Now, does that mean that you shouldn't take them and they aren't your best shot at treating this cancer? No.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: It's a risk benefit thing, right?

Justin: It is.

Sydnee: Like that's the conversation you have to have.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: But will they have side effects that will cause you illness? Many of them do. Not all, but many of them do.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And it's varying, and it's not always as terrible as it might be portrayed in the media, but certainly that is a possibility. And so that's a

real conversation you can have. But instead it gets, you know by the wellness people, it gets dismissed as “Well, it’s poison.”

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Well no, it’s more nuanced. But also on the medical end, me saying “It’s your only option,” well that’s not true. It’s— What I should say is... “It is the only evidence-based intervention that will— that has a chance of giving you— of treating this disease or of giving you more time,” or whatever our outcome is, right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: That’s what I should say. But what I say is, “It’s your only option,” and what the wellness people out there will tell you repeatedly is, “Well, no, it’s not. We got a hundred more options.”

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There are always other options. The question is do any of them work? And obviously they don’t, but that’s not what they’re concerned about because they get you to their wellness retreats.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Which are beautiful, and you drink juice, and everybody’s happy. And they sing songs and they meditate and they do yoga, and it’s very beautiful, and they portray that so well. Look how— And they talk about like taking control of yourself.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: And taking control of your body, and we love these messages. And it’s so empowering. And in traditional medical treatment, we don’t say that to patients.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: What we say is, “Do this stuff or you will die.”

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: We don't say, "Take control of your body."

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: We say, "This is it," and in my mind as a medical profession, that argument's enough. Like if you tell me "It's either this or die," I'll do it.

Justin: Yeah. 'Cause you don't wanna.

Sydnee: Right. But I also am taking for granted the fact that I went to medical school, I understand—

Justin: So you're already in the pocket.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: You already believe this. Because—

Sydnee: Well, I don't believe it, I know it.

Justin: You know it.

Sydnee: 'Cause I understand it.

Justin: That it— Okay. I think you're hitting on the gulf, right?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: It's the gulf between know and believe.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: Because you know the truth, you're "Nothing else is gonna work, and this may work, but I don't know. And I know nothing else is gonna work, or at least I know this is your best shot." But if you don't believe that, then your brain is gonna give you anything else, right?

It's gonna give you any other... Anything it can give you other than "no."
It will give you "Well, I don't believe what they're saying." Okay, well
that's different, you're having a different conversation at that point, right?

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Because belief doesn't even enter into it for you.

Sydnee: No. No I don't— I— And that's the— I think that's the tricky part
too is that when we start to get into these conversations when it—
Especially when it comes to advanced cancer... very rarely are those of us
in the medical profession offering you a cure, right?

Like we're not offering you "This will fix it," we're offering you time and
we're offering you statistics, we're offering you odds. We're offering you a
little more or a little less of whatever, but we're not... we're not offering
you health.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Right?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And on the other side, that's what they're offering you.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: And this starts to bump up against like do you believe in
miracles? Do you have faith?

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Is there a religious perspective you're coming from.

Justin: Also, is it true that sometimes weird crap happens in medicine for
no reason, that shouldn't have happened, that defies all logic and defies
our entire underst— Yup. [wheezes] Right?

Sydnee: Well I mean—

Justin: That also does happen, right? Like—

Sydnee: That's why like how often do you hear statistic that are "This works 100% of the time, and this works 0% of the time."

Justin: Yeah, yeah.

Sydnee: Like you almost never hear that because it's almost never the case.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: There are things that defy the odds, there are moments. But I will tell you this, I think the problem with that conversation and the reason why we lose patients from actual medicine to these sort of pseudoscientific pursuits is that... we're uncomfortable talking about that because we don't understand it, and so we brush past it.

No-one ever got better because they did a bunch of coffee enemas and drank a bunch of juice. We're not saying that, we're not saying [chuckles] they defied the odds that way. What we're saying is that occasionally, no matter how bad the odds seem—

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: — we're able to go through a series of treatments and people get better.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Or people get more time than we expected them to have. That's what we're saying, and I don't— I think we are so dismissive, and I understand it, 'cause when I hear somebody say, "But I bought this super expensive supplement from somebody who looked really nice online and they told me it would fix this," I wanna scream. And I'm not mad at the person who bought the supplement.

Justin: Your mom. [chuckles]

Sydnee: [chuckles] No. I'm mad at the person who sold it, and I'm mad at all of the pre— the pressures of the society that made that person

capable of doing this, and I'm mad at it and I don't wanna engage with it, and I don't wanna explain why.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: What I wanna say is "That's a rip off, that's a scam, that won't work. Listen to me. I know what I'm talking about." And that— I mean, everything I just said turned you off, didn't it?

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: What I just said, you don't wanna hear that.

Justin: Well not me, but I know you really well.

Sydnee: Well there's no— [chuckles] there's no empathy, there's no sensitivity. I made you feel bad and dumb, and now you don't wanna listen to me 'cause I'm the one that made you feel bad and dumb, and this other person made you feel powerful. And made you feel in control, and made you feel smarter than all of us... nerds in white coats.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Who think we know best.

Justin: Can I tell yah? I think sometimes the medical community could take a note from *What Not To Wear*. Because I feel like if you come onto *What Not To Wear*, and they're like, "That looks like trash. Put this on," and they throw a Dr.— they throw some clothes at you, and you— they're like, "Your clothes are garbage. We're professionals, put these on right now," you would never see an episode of *What Not To Wear*, right? Because they've gotta— Or *Queer Eye*, another great example, right?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: They don't throw the clothes and say like, "Put these clothes on, 'cause they make you— You look like a dumpster right now, I hate the way you look. Put these on, they're good." They don't do that. 'Cause even though they know better, they gotta walk you to it, because they're trying to give you power, right?

And if they wandered— if they threw like those clothes at people and they said, “Here, put this whole look on. And now let us change your clothes, let us do all this,” they’re gonna have that same pushback against it right. Because they’re not— you haven’t brought them onboard yet, right? And it seems like that— a little bit of that onboarding and that empowering might be really helpful.

Sydnee: I think what you’re— what you are talking about is one of the core medical ethics, which is autonomy. And there is— I think there is a misconception sometimes on our end as healthcare providers that autonomy is simply something I recognize.

You have the ability, as my patient, to make decisions about your own body. That is your autonomy, and I simply recognize that autonomy in the way I advise you, right? But I think that there are many times in medicine where it is our job to give our patient autonomy, it is an action. It’s not a passive thing.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: “I understand that in the face of this diagnosis, you have lost control.”

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: “My job is to hand you your autonomy back, or at least help you find it.”

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: This is something where you can assist your patient and say, “It is your choice. It is your body. There are options. Here’s what they all are. Here’s what they each mean. Yeah, I know none of these are great, none of these are perfect, and I’m not here to tell you exactly what you should do.

But I will tell you what I think the best options are out there right now, and what they mean for you and your life, and I will answer every question and help you as you make these decisions.” But I think if we thought of autonomy more as an action.

Justin: Mm.

Sydnee: As opposed to as something that we should just always be aware of, we would be a lot more powerful in helping patients who face these kinds of diagnoses. 'Cause that's what these people, these wellness bloggers do.

Justin: They met 'em where they're at.

Sydnee: And we're not great at that always in medicine.

Justin: Do you feel like— Ebert said that— Roger Ebert said that films are an engine to create empathy, and obviously this isn't a film, it's a miniseries, but same idea. Do you feel like, as a healthcare provider, this gave you like any additional insight into like how you communicate with patients?

Or like some of that— Like obviously you've thought about that a lot due to this show and what you do at Harmony House and everything, you've thought about this a lot more than most people. But like do you feel like you understand anything better having watched it?

Sydnee: I do. I do, I think the way that the doctors were portrayed, it was interesting because everything they said and did made total sense to me.

Justin: [chuckles] Yeah.

Sydnee: Didn't bother me for a second.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Like even when they were just like, "Yeah, I know it's tough, but this is what you gotta do." And I know, I know that's not what we should say. We should never look at somebody and say, "This is what you have to do." No it's not, it's not what they have to do, it's what we think is best. But we do talk that way.

Justin: When— Yeah.

Sydnee: And I can see myself at moments, at— when I am not at my best, I see myself saying “Just take the medicine.” Like I see it.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And I know it’s not how to best help a patient.

Justin: And I saw Syd getting her hackles up getting ready for some— Like any time there’s like doctors are represented in a poor light, I think that Sydnee is ready to be defensive. But I kept waiting for you but like it seemed pretty fair. I mean yeah, like you were kinda like, “Yeah, this is all stuff we’d say.” [chuckles] “I mean like yeah, I agree with ‘em.”

Sydnee: Well and I understand because I could sense the frustration, especially as you look at like the character Milla’s team of doctors.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: The lead doctor is so frustrated by the end.

Justin: Instantly Sydnee’s already on that guy’s side, this random doctor that just—

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: — has no name, has not appeared in the movie, just like is now the hero of the whole picture. [chuckles]

Sydnee: Well. No but you could tell—

Justin: [snorts]

Sydnee: — by the end like the— he’s gonna lose this patient, and he— and she didn’t have to— Like that didn’t have to happen.

Justin: He’s messing up too, right? Like that’s a— it’s a systemic problem.

Sydnee: Right.

Justin: It’s a system.

Sydnee: We are te— We— Because part of what we are taught, and this is a dysfunction. Part of what we are taught is that my job is to keep people alive, period. What's the end of that? I mean I can't make people live forever.

Justin: Yet.

Sydnee: So ultimately I lose every time. And so I am now invested-

Justin: Are you saying what I think you're saying? Which is you treat...

Sydnee: [chuckles]

Justin: You treat the disease, you win you lose. You treat the person, you win every time. Is that what you're saying, Sydnee? Because if you're quoting Dr. Patch Adams, noted West Virginian, Dr. Patch Adams.

Sydnee: Mm.

Justin: As portrayed by funny man Robin Williams, on this show, I am just going to plotz. So you're saying—

Sydnee: I guess I was. I guess was saying that. I didn't mean to say that, but I guess I was! And that's the problem is that we take it personally and we shouldn't.

And we're all humans and we're all just doing our best, and if we were more humble in the face of what we don't understand, and more humble in the face of a disease that we still don't know how to beat, there it is. And we all talk about that honestly and openly, I think we can help guide patients to make better decisions for themselves, and not fall into these traps which are "This looks better."

Justin: I think it's a really good, powerful lesson too that hopefully is like a new page that we're kind of turning over, in the realization that being right isn't going to fix you. Being right isn't gonna fix the problem. You can be as right as you want, and being right isn't gonna fix this. We gotta figure out ways of communicating better.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: Like we can keep being righter and righter and righter, but until we're talking to people and meeting them where they're at, nothing gets improved, you know? And I'm hopeful that that's what the conversation can kind of pivot around.

Thank you so much for listening to *Sawbones*, this podcast that we enjoy doing for you so much. Thank you to the Taxpayers for the use of their song "Medicines" as the intro and outro of our program, and thanks to you for listening.

[theme music fades in]

Justin: We sure appreciate yah. That's gonna do it for us, until next time my name's Justin McElroy.

Sydney: I'm Sydney McElroy.

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

[outro theme music plays]

[ukulele chord]

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