



A Womb of One's Own?

Lesson Plan

playing god? in the classroom is an educational resource designed to accompany the *playing god?* podcast, for use by instructors to introduce bioethics concepts and facilitate discussions of ethics among high school and above students. The *playing god? in the classroom* resources are free and available for non-commercial uses, with attribution to the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics. For other uses and more information, please contact playinggod@jhu.edu.

This Lesson Plan accompanies Episode 5, Season 1 of *playing god?*

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Summary

Jen Dingle yearned to get pregnant and have children, but there was one problem: she was born without a uterus. She was searching for a way to become a mother when she learned that a local research hospital was starting up a uterus transplant program – one of the first in the United States. Jen shares her personal experience with listeners and the Podcast goes on to explore the risks, financial costs, and ethics issues of this new combination of organ transplant and reproductive technology.

This Lesson Plan can facilitate a discussion about the ethics decisions that accompany the development of new medical technologies: questions of fair access, appropriate oversight and regulation, and favorable risk-benefit ratios. It also addresses the special challenges and issues that arise when organ transplants are combined with reproductive technologies. Students will compare the ethics trade-offs of three different ways uteruses can be donated and will analyze the ethics of other reproductive technologies.

Vocabulary

The following are key terms used in the Episode and their definitions. The terms are marked in bold when they appear elsewhere in the Lesson Plan.

Altruism

Acting in the best interest of others, sometimes superseding one's own interests.

→ Women who volunteer to undergo risky surgery to donate their uteruses to strangers are often motivated by **altruism**.

Coercion

When someone is compelled, pressured, or forced to act in a certain way or make a certain decision, sometimes against their own interests.

→ A mother or aunt may be **coerced** by other family members to donate her uterus to her daughter or niece.

Gestational Carrier/Surrogate

A gestational carrier or gestational surrogate is someone who carries a pregnancy for someone else and does not have a genetic connection to the resulting baby.

Informed Consent

Ethical and legal standards require **informed consent** in medical decision making and when agreeing to participate in research. In medicine, **informed consent** requires “a discussion of the nature of the procedure, the risks and benefits, the reasonable alternatives, and an assessment of the patient's understanding of these items.”¹

Discussion Guide

The following Assessment Questions can be used by instructors to evaluate student comprehension of Andrea's story and the bioethics concepts featured in the Podcast Episode. The Discussion Questions can prompt students to make claims and provide evidence and their reasoning. Student comprehension and views can be assessed before and after listening to the Episode and/or participating in the group activity.

Assessment Questions

- How did Jen Dingle get a uterus?
- In Jen's case, how did the doctors make sure that the person who donated their uterus wasn't **coerced**?
- What are some other ways to start a family besides uterus transplant?
 - Why didn't they work for Jen?
- What are some of the sources of donated uteruses mentioned in the Episode?
Sample answers below.
 - *Donation by a living family member (for example, in Sweden, people could only receive a uterus from a parent)*
 - *Donation by a living stranger (this is the donation source in Jen's case)*
 - *Donation by a deceased organ donor*
- Who is facing risks when a uterus is transplanted? What risks are they facing?
Sample answers below.
 - *Living donors face surgery risks*
 - *Living donors who are related to the recipient may face pressure from family to donate their uterus in addition to risks of surgery*
 - *Recipients face surgery risks, as well risks associated with organ transplant (for example, organ rejection, complications from immunosuppressants)*
 - *Recipients might not successfully get pregnant or have a baby, even if the organ transplant is successful*
 - *Risks to the baby who is gestated in and delivered from a transplanted uterus*

Discussion Questions

- Currently, women of reproductive age who were born without a uterus due to a **congenital** condition are eligible to join the research study testing uterus transplants, and the purpose of the transplant is for these women to try to get pregnant. In the future, when this procedure becomes more widely available, who should be able to use it? *Sample answers below.*
 - *People who were born with a uterus but lost it (for example, from cancer or an accident)*
 - *Transgender women who hope to get pregnant*
 - *Transgender women or others who do not intend to get pregnant*
- Think about other ways to become a parent. What ethical concerns are associated with these methods?
 - What is needed for **informed consent**? What are the risks of **coercion**?
 - What are the risks, and to whom? Do the risks outweigh the benefits?
 - Who has access to these methods? Who doesn't? Is it fair?

Sample Activities

The activities allow students to actively engage with the bioethics questions at the center of the Episode. Students will develop critical thinking skills and reason-based judgment by citing evidence from the Podcast and other sources. In bioethics, there often isn't a single "right" answer to a particular question; ideally, students will express and evaluate diverse viewpoints about complex, real-world problems.

Small Group or Partner Activity: Pros and Cons

Description:

Students, in pairs and as a class, review the pros and cons of different uterus donation sources (living donor, known/related; living donor, anonymous; deceased donor). Students should take the time to consider concerns highlighted in the Episode, for example, financial cost, emotional labor, health risks, and any other aspects they can come up with. This helps them think about concepts like risks, benefits, **informed consent**, and how these concepts interact.

Instructions:

Before the Activity:

- Students should listen to the Podcast Episode. They should be familiar with the terms provided in the Vocabulary.
- Print the Lesson 5 Handout, one for each small group or pair.

Pros and Cons:

Students are divided into pairs. Each is given a copy of the Lesson 5 Handout with three different sources for uterus donation and a blank list to fill in pros and cons. Each pair is given around 10 minutes to think about the different sources and fill in their sheets based on ideas presented in the Episode as well as their own. While students are working on this, the teacher can use the chalkboard or whiteboard to make a larger blank list that looks something like this:

Living Donor, Known/Related		Living Donor, Anonymous		Deceased Donor	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons

After this, the class is brought back together to compile all the pros and cons they have come up with on the big list that the teacher has created. Repetitions and overlap are expected, and the teacher can guide the class in condensing their thoughts into a single list. Then, as a class, the students can select a single model that they believe is the best, through having a show-of-hands vote.

Individual Activity: Research & Writing

1. *ELA writing assignment:* Over the years, there have been many innovations to help people have children. This includes IVF, gestational carriers, and now uterus transplants, among others. Each student can pick one of these techniques or technologies and briefly explore the ethical questions it poses and the questions that surrounded its earliest use.

Additional Resources

Further readings about key topics covered in the Episode.

More About Uterus Transplant Programs

[Uterus Transplant Program](#), Baylor Scott & White Health.

[Uterus Transplantation: state of the art in 2021](#), Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics, 2021.

More About the Ethics of Uterus Transplants

[Uterine transplant raises hopes — and thorny ethical questions](#), STAT, 2016.

[First Baby Born To U.S. Uterus Transplant Patient Raises Ethics Questions](#), NPR, 2017.

[Uterus Transplantation: The Ethics of Using Deceased Versus Living Donors](#), *The American Journal of Bioethics*, 2018.

[Uterus Transplantation: ethical considerations](#), *Current Opinion in Organ Transplantation*, 2021.

Careers Mentioned

Physician:

Ruth Farrell, MD (Obstetrician-Gynecologist (OB-GYN))

Liza Johanneson, MD, PhD (OB-GYN, transplant surgeon)

Bioethicist:

Ruth Farrell, MD

Researcher:

Liza Johanneson, MD, PhD

Nurse

About This Lesson Plan

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The playing god? podcast is a production of the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics Dracopoulos-Bloomberg iDeas Lab. Season One was co-produced with Pushkin Industries with support from the Greenwall Foundation.

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The Podcast Episode and this Lesson Plan are not designed to answer patient-specific clinical, professional, legal, or ethical questions. Information contained herein is not intended as a substitute for professional consultation.

¹ Shah P, Thornton I, Kopitnik N, Hipskind JE. "Informed Consent." 2024. In: StatPearls. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing.