

Medicine on the big and small screen: *The God Committee*

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The God Committee

Starring Kelsey Grammer, Julia Styles, Janeane Garofalo, Dan Hedaya, and Colman Domingo

Directed by Austin Stark.

Film released July 2, 2021. Available Netflix, Apple TV, Google Play, Prime Video, YouTube, Vudu.

Running time 98 minutes.

Reviewed by Craig Klugman, PhD

The God Committee opens in 2014 with a hit-and-run accident that kills an 18-year-old male in Buffalo, New York. He is an organ donor. Simultaneously, the new cardiac surgeon, Dr. Jordan Taylor, is appointed to the transplant committee at a fictional New York City hospital. The committee must decide which of three patients will receive the donor's heart.

The film premiered at the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival and is based on a 2014 one-act play of the same name written by Mark St. Germain. While maintaining much of the concept and plot, the film changes the characters and the ending while adding a timeline of events in 2021. The title refers to the 1962 Admissions and Policies Committee of the Seattle Artificial Kidney Center at Swedish Hospital (a.k.a. "The God Committee") that selected which patients would receive treatment at the dawn of chronic dialysis. The historical committee, play, and film force viewers to ask how organ distribution decisions are made and what outside influences are brought to the process—money, legacy, race, social worth, community, and moral character.

The three potential heart recipients in the movie are Walter Curtis, a 48-year-old, obese, Black man with giant cell myocarditis. Curtis is married with three daughters and has few funds and nine years earlier survived a suicide attempt.

Janet Pike is a 59-year-old, unemployed, single woman with excellent insurance but no social support system. She is the healthiest of the three but may not want the heart.

Trip Granger is a 30-year-old playboy with congenital heart disease. He arrives unconscious on a private plane alongside his badly injured girlfriend. Granger has a history of drug abuse, and, as is later learned, hurt his girlfriend after she revealed she is pregnant. Granger's drug test comes back positive for cocaine, but as viewers are told, ampicillin can create a false positive. Was he taking the antibiotic? His father, billionaire Emmett Granger, has offered a \$25 million donation to the struggling heart transplant program if his son gets the heart.

No mention is ever made of which patient is the most biologically compatible with the heart. Viewers must be able to suspend disbelief and accept that the heart will work equally

well in all patients at this one hospital. Ethically, patient autonomy only comes into play in Pike's ambivalence about a transplant—the decisions are all in the hands of others.

The story is about the ethical challenges and conflicts of interest the committee members face. Dr. Andre Boxer is a renowned cardiac surgeon who is soon departing the hospital to work in private biotech. He is in a relationship with Taylor but ends it when she is appointed to the committee. In a flash forward to 2021, viewers learn that he is developing genetically engineered pig organs for human transplant in a startup funded by Emmett Granger.

Dr. Lao is a psychiatrist whose daughter recently died of a drug overdose and feels too close to the issues in this case.

Nurse Larkin points out how the donation can enable the heart transplant program to help many other poor patients like Curtis.

Dr. Valerie Gilroy is the chief of the transplant service and its administrator who is fighting to save her job when *U.S. News* downgrades the transplant program.

Father Charles Dunbar is a priest and former attorney representing the Board of Trustees who want the donation but do not want to be seen as interfering in the decisions of the committee. As Dunbar says, "It's always been about maximizing assets, unfortunately, the assets happen to be human organs."

Spoiler alert

As for resolving the main question of the film—who gets the heart—the answer is Trip. While current drug use would make him ineligible, Gilroy plants ampicillin in his belongings to support her narrative of the false positive drug test. Emmett's money is too powerful to resist.

However, Trip dies six months later of an overdose. This ending is less satisfying than that of the play, where a 68-year-old Hispanic, female patient gets the heart. The equivalent Trip character in the play (Blazer) also gets a heart, but in Boston because his wealth allowed him to be listed at multiple transplant centers.

The play's ending shows that money still rules but the regular person at least has a shot. The lesson of the film, however, is summarized in the words of Dunbar, "You're making decisions based on personal perceptions...If you make choices based on anything that can't be quantified, you're playing God."

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