

Drugs industry protecting 'morally unacceptable' patent system

July 17 2008

Major drugs companies are using fierce lobbying tactics to protect a pharmaceutical patent system that is "simply morally unacceptable", a world-leading political philosopher will tell a major meeting of UK and European pharmacologists today.

Addressing an audience that will include senior figures from the pharmaceutical industry, Thomas Pogge, Professor of Philosophy and International Affairs at Yale University in the United States, will argue that international rules on intellectual property "violate the human rights of poor people by denying them access to vital medicines".

He will go on to say that huge mortality and morbidity rates can be dramatically lowered by reforming the way the development of new medical treatments is funded.

In his AstraZeneca-sponsored lecture entitled, 'Advanced Medicines: Must We Exclude the Global Poor?', Pogge will propose an alternative licensing system called the Health Impact Fund (HIF) which he says is "required as an add-on to the existing system to render it human-rights compliant".

The HIF would be a global agency, says Pogge, underwritten by governments. It would offer to reward the patentee of any new medicine, during its first decade or so, with annual payments proportional to this medicine's demonstrated global health impact.

Registering a medicine with the Fund would be voluntary and require a concession affecting its price. Pogge says this would give innovators the opportunity to forgo "monopoly rents in favour of an alternative path that would provide ample rewards for the development of new high-impact medicines without excluding the poor from their use".

Pogge will deliver his AstraZeneca-sponsored lecture on the final day of the Federation of European Pharmacological Societies (EPHAR) 2008 Congress, hosted by the British Pharmacological Society at The University of Manchester.

Speaking ahead of his lecture, Pogge said: "The main responsibility for change lies with politicians and citizens. But pharmaceutical companies are also citizens, and they play a significant role in the political process of most societies. They lobby a lot. And here I do see fault. They lobby for holding the line on a status quo that is simply morally unacceptable.

"They do this because they know the existing rules can have a profitable business model under them and are uncertain what alternative rules would be settled upon once the existing rules were found unacceptable.

"I want to change this conservative attitude. I want to give them an institutional reform that they can endorse and unite behind. I am convinced they would do better, on the whole, with the Health Impact Fund than without. I want to convince them of this. And I want to show them that, on balance, they have more to gain than to lose by supporting this reform.

"It will be harder and harder to hold the line on the existing system, and the HIF reform preserves pretty much everything they like about this system. In other words, they have both moral and strategic reasons to support the HIF."

Pogge's lecture is expected to provoke fierce debate at the conference, with many delegates holding alternative views.

Source: University of Manchester

Citation: Drugs industry protecting 'morally unacceptable' patent system (2008, July 17) retrieved 4 May 2024 from

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