

Don't let patent rows hamper search for virus vaccine: UN agency

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Some countries are calling for any vaccine against the novel coronavirus to be patent-free

The UN patent agency has hailed the push to create a coronavirus vaccine and make it globally available, but warned against allowing

copyright rows to overshadow and delay the process.

"What we need in the first place here is innovation," Francis Gurry, the head of the UN's World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), told reporters in a virtual briefing.

World Health Organization member states last week adopted a resolution recognising that extensive immunisation against COVID-19 would be a "global public good", and pushing for any vaccine to be equitably and fairly distributed to all.

Some, including South Africa, are calling for any vaccine against the novel coronavirus to be patent-free.

But that idea has met with pushback from [pharmaceutical companies](#) and Washington, which opposes any challenge to international [intellectual property rights](#).

Gurry pointed out that "there are provisions in international legal instruments and there are provisions in national legal instruments which allow access, or intellectual property rights to be overridden in certain circumstances."

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed over 350,000 people out of the more than 5.5 million infected worldwide, certainly represents such an emergency, he said.

"And I have no doubt that governments will use those provisions to ensure that we do have fair and equitable access to any vaccine that may be developed."

But Gurry stressed that for the time being, "we don't have a vaccine", warning against removing the incentives in place to promote innovation.

"We are in a situation where we are desperate for appropriate and good innovation," he said.

"I think we have to use the whole of the incentive structure that we have developed to encourage [innovation](#) that will give us the [vaccine](#)."

He acknowledged that going forward, "there are going to be extremely delicate questions that will arise on how to return some value to the innovator... while ensuring that we have affordable, accessible treatments and vaccines."

Certify digital files

His comments came as WIPO launched a new international service Wednesday aimed at reducing the risk of seeing new ideas and formulae stolen during collaborations online.

The service, called WIPO Proof, provides tamper-proof evidence of the existence at a point in time of any digital file.

It is meant to help protect ideas before they are fully-formed enough to enjoy intellectual property protection, and to mitigate the risk of future legal disputes.

"We think it is timely," Gurry said, pointing out that amid the current pandemic and lockdowns people are increasingly sharing ideas digitally.

Such a service already exists at the national level in a number of countries, but Gurry said there was a need for an international platform.

"Given the extent of (political) distrust that exists in the world today," he said, "we believe there is an opening for an impartial international authority" to certify digital files.

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