

Pharma lobby blasts 'stupid' pandemic patent plans

January 11 2023, by Robin MILLARD



World Trade Organization members are discussing broadening a temporary IP waiver for producing Covid vaccines.

Stripping patent protection from COVID-19 treatments is a "mind-bogglingly stupid" idea, the head of a leading pharmaceutical lobby said Wednesday, warning that the move would put industry innovation at risk.

Thomas Cueni, director general of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA), said the industry was still working on more effective COVID vaccines and treatments.

But Cueni said manufacturers would not risk ploughing investment into potential products if their intellectual property (IP) rights could be stripped away.

Cueni told reporters it would be "seriously dangerous" to move from voluntary knowledge-sharing seen during the pandemic to a "coercive" situation.

He added that when knowledge and technology is shared, generic manufacturers were still reliant on close support from the patent holders.

At the World Health Organization, plans are being drawn up for what could be a legally binding treaty on future pandemic preparedness.

Meanwhile, World Trade Organization members are discussing broadening a temporary IP waiver for producing COVID vaccines, agreed in June 2022, to include tests and treatments.

"That debate should simply have been closed," Cueni said.

He said more than 800 potential COVID-19 treatments were being researched—and of approved treatments, around two-thirds were pre-existing medicines that companies had tested to see if they worked against COVID.

If the patent on the COVID part of any medicine is removed, there is "no way... to protect the original part", he said.

"I have heard many companies say we would never have considered risking our core business and checking if it works" if they risked losing the protection that encouraged them to invest in at-risk research.

Therefore, an IP waiver "potentially undermining what worked so well in this pandemic is basically mind-bogglingly stupid", Cueni said.

He also said proposals to waive patents on tests were "ludicrous" as there was no generic market for diagnostics.

Vaccine equity vow

Cueni said IFPMA members were concerned about ensuring that what worked well in the COVID-19 response is not lost or compromised for future pandemic preparedness.

He said manufacturers needed fast, unhindered access to respond to emerging pathogens.

But he acknowledged that pharma firms needed to learn from "what didn't work well—that is equitable roll-out" of vaccines.

"We need to make sure that dose-sharing is something we build in from day one," he said.

Cueni said there needed to be greater geographic diversity in manufacturing, with most vaccines being produced only in the United States, Europe, China and India.

"Even if that works, you will still need to open borders and remove trade barriers," he said, noting that supply chain problems could slow production.

And even then, "we need to work on country readiness because once we had not just sufficient supply of vaccines but an over-supply of vaccines, we still didn't see the jabs getting into the arms of people".

Cost claim

With the pandemic now entering its fourth year, Cueni said major manufacturers were busy working on improved jabs and treatments.

He hoped that future vaccines would offer longer-lasting protection.

"It would be nice if one jab per year would suffice," he said.

As for the profits made by the pharmaceutical industry during the pandemic, Cueni said, "When you look at how much COVID-19 cost the global economy, the cost of the treatments or the vaccines was just a tiny fraction of that."

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Citation: Pharma lobby blasts 'stupid' pandemic patent plans (2023, January 11) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-pharma-lobby-blasts-stupid-pandemic.html>

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