

EU lawmakers back COVID vaccines patent waiver

20 May 2021



A medical assistant prepares a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine to be administered to a patient. Credit: Public domain image courtesy of Lisa Ferdinando, U.S. Department of Defense

The European Parliament has urged the EU to back a push for a temporary waiver of coronavirus vaccine patents, in the face of scepticism from Brussels and key member states.

Lawmakers voting late Wednesday narrowly approved an amendment calling on the bloc to back an Indian and South African proposal to the World Trade Organization "for a temporary waiver on intellectual property (IP) rights for COVID-19 vaccines, equipment and treatments".

The text, which was attached to an unrelated health motion by MEPs from The Left (GUE), also "urges pharmaceutical companies to share their knowledge and data".

Earlier this month, EU leaders said they were willing to discuss patent waivers after US President Joe Biden backed the plan—but called for more details on the proposal and urged other major producers to first increase their exports of much-needed jobs.

EU trade commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis told lawmakers on Wednesday that Brussels would put forward its own proposal at the WTO focused on boosting production and freeing up exports.

He insisted that Brussels would "engage constructively" to see if a temporary waiver of patents could help bolster global supplies and access to the doses.

WTO boss Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who is in Brussels, said production was key to addressing the global shortfall in jobs.

"I want to be clear: Getting the IP waiver will not be enough," Okonjo-Iweala told MEPs before talks with EU trade ministers.

"We need to decentralise manufacturing. It's anomalous that Africa, with 1.3 billion people, has 0.17 percent of the manufacturing capacity of the world," she said.

The World Health Organization, India and South Africa have all called for patents to be temporarily suspended in a bid to help boost supplies to poorer nations struggling to vaccinate their populations.

The EU points to the fact that it has exported over 200 million vaccine doses—while other key manufacturers such as the US and Britain have sent only limited supplies abroad.

Officials from the bloc have said the hoarding of crucial ingredients needed for vaccines by some nations was a larger obstacle than patent protection.

Key EU members France and Germany have defended vaccine patents, arguing that innovative companies must be rewarded for their efforts.

Germany is the home of BioNTech, which developed the vaccine now being produced by US

giant Pfizer that has become the mainstay of Europe's inoculation campaign.

"The limiting factors in the production of vaccines are the production capacities and the high quality standards and not patents," a spokeswoman for Chancellor Angela Merkel's government said earlier this month.

"The protection of intellectual property is a source of innovation and must remain so in the future." The European Commission has also defended this view.

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APA citation: EU lawmakers back COVID vaccines patent waiver (2021, May 20) retrieved 16 September 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-eu-lawmakers-covid-vaccines-patent.html>

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