

Proposals to waive intellectual property rights for pandemic response products in the World Health Organization pandemic accord need Australia's support

TO THE EDITOR: Gleeson and colleagues¹ are right² that we need to see action to prevent the inequity we saw in access to vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. As the international community rebuilds a global health architecture that is fit to respond to future pandemics, addressing equity must be central. Last year, pharmaceutical companies tabled practical proposals to ensure that no-one is left behind, which was supported by the Developing Countries Vaccine Manufacturers Network (DCVMN) and the Biotechnology Innovation Organization (BIO).³

As we address the equity challenge, we must not lose sight of the innovation delivered in response to COVID-19, with pharmaceutical companies producing billions of safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics at a speed very few thought possible. This was facilitated by a strong innovation ecosystem, which provides a framework to manage the risks and cost involved in pursuing new medicines and vaccines. Of the 23 mRNA vaccines that went to clinical trials, only two were successful.⁴ The intellectual property (IP) framework is core to this ecosystem.

Contrary to acting as a barrier to equitable roll out, IP enabled companies to partner on a voluntary basis. The latest data⁵ show that over two-thirds of the

374 manufacturing and supply chain announcements for COVID-19 vaccines have involved a collaboration — voluntary licensing partnerships, technology transfers and contract manufacturing agreements — between licensors and licensees,⁶ and of the 84 active voluntary licensing agreements for COVID-19 treatments, 80 are in low income countries.

We must focus on the multilateral and regional policies needed, including regulatory harmonisation, supply chain and health care system strengthening, and the removal of trade barriers. Rather than address the root causes of inequitable access, we believe an intellectual property waiver would undermine the very system that delivered billions of safe and effective vaccines and therapeutics against COVID-19, and which will be central to our response to any future pandemics.

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Competing interests: Thomas Cueni, Director General, International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA) and Elizabeth de Somer, Chief Executive Officer, Medicines Australia, represent pharmaceutical companies, including those involved in the discovery, development, production, and delivery of COVID-19 diagnostics, medicines and vaccines.

IFPMA is the trade association representing the pharmaceutical industry in Geneva, with official relations with the United Nations (UN). As such, IFPMA holds formal consultative status with UN specialised agencies, such as the World Health Organization. IFPMA is a founding member of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator and represents the biopharmaceutical industry on this global collaboration set up in the wake of the pandemic to accelerate development, production, and equitable access to COVID-19 tests, treatments, and vaccines.

Medicines Australia is the trade association representing the pharmaceutical industry in Australia.

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