

Pharmaceuticals sector**Big drugmakers under pressure to share patents against coronavirus**

WHO backs making pharmaceuticals open up intellectual property as it did to fight HIV/Aids

Donato Paolo Mancini in London YESTERDAY

Drugmakers are facing mounting calls to give up their patent rights for potentially life-saving treatments and vaccines for coronavirus as authorities worldwide race to curb the pandemic's death toll.

The heads of the World Health Organization and Unitaid, a UN-backed group funding global health innovation, have [welcomed a proposal](#) devised by Costa Rica for companies voluntarily to pool their intellectual property for all medical interventions — including treatment, vaccines and diagnostics.

Doing so would enable governments or generic drugmakers to manufacture and sell the products at much lower prices than are currently available in the world market.

Marisol Touraine, Unitaid's chair and a former French health minister, told the Financial Times that "extraordinary circumstances" warranted "extraordinary solutions".

Pharmaceutical companies have joined intellectual property pools in the past that have enabled treatments for HIV/Aids, tuberculosis and Hepatitis C to be extended to low-income countries at affordable prices. The proposed coronavirus pool, however, would be available to countries worldwide.

Daniel Salas, Costa Rica's health minister, told the Financial Times he was hopeful the WHO would soon go ahead with the plan.

In a statement, the WHO said it was committed to equitable access, including for interventions related to Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. "We are exploring all avenues to ensure people who need it have access to effective and safe products for Covid-19," it said.

On Monday, a vast mobilisation of global healthcare groups to fight the virus accelerated with Johnson & Johnson announcing a [potential vaccine](#) that could be available early next year. Abbott Laboratories has also launched a rapid test kit.

Drugmakers are usually jealous guardians of their most lucrative patents, which expire years after they are first filed.

Gilead Sciences [performed a](#) U-turn last week, renouncing a so-called orphan drug designation in the US that granted special status to its potential coronavirus treatment remdesivir, and did so only 48 hours after first disclosing it.

Gilead said it was aware of the Costa Rican proposal and that it would evaluate any programme once it was defined by the WHO.

AbbVie, which makes a potential treatment known as Kaletra, gave up its [global intellectual property rights](#) for the drug after Israel issued a “compulsory licence” that enables the country to use it against coronavirus without the patent holder’s consent.

Germany, Canada, Australia and Chile have all taken steps or are weighing up moves to issue compulsory licences more easily.

Switzerland’s Roche, which makes testing kits for the virus, agreed to share the recipe for its testing liquid with the Dutch government after lawmakers there accused it of rationing supply and significantly decreasing national testing capabilities.

The company declined to comment on the shortage but noted there was no intellectual property protection surrounding the liquid.

Supporters of the Costa Rican proposal include the former patent chiefs of Switzerland’s Novartis and US biotech Gilead.

Members of the European Parliament and several groups, including Médecins Sans Frontières, have separately said monopolies should not be granted in the fight against the novel coronavirus.

Ms Touraine, Unitaid chair, said: “Solidarity is not only a question of humanitarian approach and perspective, it’s also a very rational approach. To fight a global pandemic we need a global response and we need to provide equitable access to treatment.”

Editor’s note



The Financial Times is making key coronavirus coverage free to read to help everyone stay informed. [Find the latest here.](#)

Jamie Love, of Knowledge Ecology International, an intellectual property advocacy group, said: “This is a moment, a crisis, that calls for people to co-operate and take care of each other. The effort to pool the rights in technologies and data globally is designed to make things happen faster and to have more equal outcomes, globally.”

Sanofi and Eli Lilly, which [are investigating vaccines and potential treatment candidates](#), did not respond to requests for comment.

IFPMA, an international lobby group for drugmakers, said the effects of the pooling proposal on the current pandemic would likely be very limited. IFPMA however said the industry had a “strong sense of responsibility” to act alongside governments and health systems worldwide.

“We know we have a responsibility to find solutions and we are fully aware that with this pandemic we cannot expect to do business as usual,” said IFPMA’s Thomas Cueni.

Bruno Bulic, a pharma analyst at Baader Helvea, said the industry had come under intense scrutiny in recent years over claims of profiteering. “The time has come to prove industry opponents wrong, and that’s best done by lifting the toll booth,” he said.

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