

New Dutch Government Must Ensure Transparency to Control Medicine Prices

by JAUME VIDAL

After almost seven months of negotiations, The Netherlands has formed a new coalition government, which recently outlined its priorities and main policy objectives in its [Coalition Agreement](#).

On the whole, it's good news from an access to medicines perspective—particularly pricing and procurement, which remain high on the government's priority list. Some of the government's established goals, such as controlling the cost of pharmaceuticals and medical devices while seeking cooperation on procurement schemes at both the national and European levels, are laudable. The willingness, when necessary, to pressure the pharmaceutical industry to lower prices and only accept for reimbursement medicines that are thoroughly vetted for therapeutic added value are bold steps.

But these measures will be little more than well-intentioned words if not followed by strong and decisive government action that realises affordable medicines prices. To achieve this goal, it's of paramount importance for the new government to be transparent about its dealings with the pharmaceutical industry—and to demand greater transparency from the industry itself.

The final price negotiated between the government and the industry should be publicly reported. Taxpayers will probably never know the final price paid for the cystic fibrosis medicine, Orkambi, which former Health Minister, Edith Schippers, negotiated just days before leaving office. But we have a right to know.

The problem is, pharmaceutical companies demand that negotiations with governments and hospitals remain secret—even forcing them to sign confidentiality agreements—so they can charge different prices to different customers. This practice needs to stop. Confidentiality feeds opacity. And opacity hinders efficiency and limits good governance. All governments should refuse industry's confidentiality demands, but it has to start somewhere, so why not right here in The Netherlands?

At the same time, we need a strong Dutch government that demands pharmaceutical companies report the true cost of R&D for new medicines. Companies are constantly attempting to justify the high prices they set for new medicines through their purported R&D costs while refusing to publicly disclose them, or have them independently assessed.

Over the past year, there has been a ground-swell of concern from the Dutch public over the ever-rising price of medicines. They're well aware that, even in a country as well-off as The Netherlands, medicine prices simply aren't sustainable without massive tax and insurance

premium hikes, or cuts to other health services or government programmes. And when you consider the fact that a substantial chunk of public funding is invested in basic medical research, which is often used by pharmaceutical companies to develop new products, quite frankly, sky-high prices for new medicines just aren't fair on the tax payer who are actually paying twice.

Why should a pharmaceutical company be able to pick and choose the most promising research, register it for a patent under its name, and then charge it back to taxpayers by demanding an exorbitant price?

Our government needs to track, trace and attach conditions to publicly-funded R&D so medicines that are partially paid for by taxpayers are appropriate, affordable and accessible for all in need.

The newly-formed Coalition Agreement encourages us to have "confidence in the future". We want to believe in this and hold hope that the government will progress in its fight to ensure equitable access to safe, affordable, effective and quality-assured medicines, both at home and abroad.

We'll support the new Dutch government's work, and that of any other government that places patients' wellbeing ahead of pharmaceutical industry patent rights and confidentiality agreements which stifle their ability to report back to those who elected them. Are you concerned that medicine prices are getting out of hand? Join HAI's 'Our Medicines, Our Right' Campaign. Here's what you can do...

- Voice your concerns at our public forum on Thursday, 7 December, 2017, where we'll discuss the causes and solutions to high medicine prices in The Netherlands with representatives from civil society, government and industry. Seats are limited, so RSVP early! Dutch will be spoken at this event.

HAI and our civil society partners are closely following the Dutch government's action on access to medicines, especially as they relate to:

- The 2016 [recommendations](#) issued by the United Nations Secretary General's High Level Panel on Access to Medicines.
- Outcomes of the [Fair Pricing Forum](#), co-hosted in May 2017 by the Dutch Government and World Health Organization.
- Insights shared during the October 2017 Dutch Parliament [hearing on the pharmaceutical industry](#).
- The recent report on R&D by the [Raad voor de Volksgezondheid en Samenleving](#).