# Private Patents and Public Health: Changing intellectual property rules for access to medicines

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Millions of people around the world do not have access to the medicines they need to treat disease or alleviate suffering. Strict patent regimes interfere with widespread access to
medicines by creating monopolies that maintain medicines prices well beyond the reach of those who need them.

The magnitude of the AIDS crisis in the late nineties brought this to the public’s attention when millions of people in developing countries died from an illness for which medicines existed, but were not available or affordable. Faced with an unprecedented health crisis — 8,000 people dying daily — the public health community launched an unprecedented global effort that eventually resulted in the large-scale availability of quality generic HIV medicines and a steady scale-up in access to those medicines. This has allowed nearly 13 million people to lead longer, healthier lives. However, trends in international intellectual property law could impact many of the policy tools used to scale up HIV treatment.

Developments in global health and specifically access to medicines policies are now at an important juncture. Impressive progress has been made in access to medicines for HIV and many lessons can be learned from that experience. But it is important to examine whether those lessons can be applied for other diseases. Today’s pharmaceutical patent regime affects almost all medicines developed since 1995 in most…

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