Transparency, Accountability and Access to Medicines

Our Work in Europe, 2021

HAI HEALTH ACTION INTERNATIONAL 40

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, that continues to wreak havoc across health systems in the Global North and South alike, has shone a light on the issue of access to medicines and vaccines in a manner without precedent. We have seen world leaders using phrases like “global public good” and “equitable access” in a way that may have been thought unthinkable not so long ago. We have also witnessed how public support for early research can result in life-saving products, such as effective vaccines, in a very short period of time. And yet the pharmaceutical industry seems happy to perpetuate a status quo that lacks transparency and relies on a broken system of intellectual property rights and patent-based monopolies as a means to fill their pockets rather than deliver on the promise and moral responsibility of access to affordable medicines **for everyone, everwhere**. However, civil society has the opportunity to demonstrate why there can be no “business as usual” as we move to the future, and we at Health Action International (HAI) will re-double our efforts to drive policy that uses all available legitimate tools at the disposal of governments and public institutions to improve access to safe, effective and affordable medicines in Europe and beyond.

PRIORITIES FOR 2021

Embedding transparency in policies and practice

The call for transparency is the bedrock of the fight for affordable access to medicines. Greater transparency at all stages of the biomedical research and development (R&D) cycle means policymakers can make informed decisions on pricing and procurement and counter information asymmetries that lead to inefficient markets and waste of public resources. There is no doubt that the opaque nature of the current system works in favour of the pharmaceutical industry and wholesalers at the expense of patients, and taxpayers more broadly, who are the ones that foot the bill. For these reasons we will continue to advocate for greater transparency, sharing information with European policymakers and lawmakers across the political spectrum through our periodic policy briefings, reports, and using social and traditional media to inform a wider audience about why this should matter, how it is affecting them and what to do about it. In doing so, we will continue to promote other models of R&D, including those based on delinking the costs of developing a given medicine from its final market price.

Promoting TRIPS flexibilities and other tools to manage IP

In 2020, recognising the need for fresh ideas on how to promote the legal tools at the disposal of policymakers to improve access to medicines, we hosted the Great Health Hack, a collaborative event that brought together civil society, students and tech professionals to come up with new, innovative ideas to promote the effective, real-world use of these tools. This year, we will be making the winning idea a reality—the creation of a crowdsourced database and dashboard for governments, with information on legal frameworks, production capabilities, medicines pricing and availability of generic alternatives to help facilitate the uptake of TRIPS flexibilities. This exciting piece of work will compliment our other policy tools, including our TRIPS Heatmap, launched in December 2020.

Improving Access to Clinical Trial Data

The COVID-19 crisis has again laid bare the need for exhaustive and methodologically-sound clinical trials before market authorisation of new medicines or vaccines is granted. The crisis has also highlighted the need for transparency, and the importance of tackling propaganda and empowering citizens with high-quality information about medicines. We will work with relevant stakeholders such as the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and Health Ministries to discuss how to streamline patients' access to information, including by hosting a webinar to highlight public access to data, bridging both bias risk and patient information.

Countering the Deleterious Impact of Pharma Promotion

This year, we will continue our work to empower healthcare professionals, and medical and pharmaceutical students to better assess promotional information on medicines and to identify the risk to prescribing practices posed by pharmaceutical marketing techniques. We will expand popular toolkit of guides, manuals and videos with new webinars to equip future doctors and other prescribers with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions in the face of industry pressures. In keeping with the student theme, we plan to pilot a peer learning programme by upskilling a group of EU-based students who can then share the knowledge they gain with others.

Bringing Medicines Policy Closer to EU Citizens

We at HAI strongly believe in sharing our learning and best practice from 40 years of advocacy to improve access to medicines. As well as sharing information with other civil society groups, we will also continue to work closely with the HAI Europe Association. On top of this, we use our own membership of policy forums—including the EMA's Patients and Consumers Working Party and the Health Technology Assessment Network Stakeholder Pool—and our position as co-facilitators of a cross-party group of Members of the European Parliament working on access to medicines to bring the voice of EU citizens to the decision-making table at every possible opportunity.

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