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Experts call to waive vaccine rights

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Defending intellectual property is a lose-lose situation, rich nations told

By RASHVINJEET S. BEDI
rashvin@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Health experts and organisations are calling for the waiver of Covid-19 vaccine rights as the number of cases worldwide escalates and the delivery of vaccines slows.

They say international property and patent rights should be waived for the vaccines at a time when the need exceeds all else.

Such waivers will enable developing nations to produce the much-needed vaccines to battle the crippling pandemic.

Datuk Dr Zulkifli Ismail, chairman of the Technical Committee of the Immunise4Life programme who supports the waiver of patent rights of Covid-19 vaccines, said Western pharmaceutical compa-

nies should take a leaf from the history of the Salk inactivated polio vaccine.

Jonas Salk's inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) was calculated to be worth US\$7bil. had it been patented and access would have been limited to the rich, he noted.

"At this time when the vaccine would bring the pandemic to an end, companies should not be counting their profits but help end the misery," said Dr Zulkifli.

He said the argument that a waiver would disincentivise vaccine development was an old capitalistic one that was "selfish and does not take the needs of the community at large".

"This pandemic has exposed the ugly head of capitalism as well as the weaknesses of governments.

"But it has also showed up the

selfish attitude of rich nations and corporations whose intentions are solely based on profit, not the urge to help the less fortunate," he said.

According to Reuters, the United States and a handful of other big countries have blocked negotiations at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) involving a proposal spearheaded by India and South Africa that now has the support of 100 WTO members.

It said the proposal would temporarily waive the intellectual property (IP) rights of pharmaceutical companies to allow developing countries to produce vaccines.

The Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDI) said a waiver was an important step in removing intellectual property barriers to scaling up and diversifying the supply of Covid-19 medical products

and vaccines.

"There is an urgent global need. High-income countries need to wake up and send a strong signal that they truly care about public health. Covid-19 has put in focus our gaps as a global community and the call-to-action list keeps growing," said DNDI South-East Asia regional director Jean-Michel Piedagnel.

He said charitable gestures would not be enough as people could see through them.

"Europe and the US need to understand that defending IP at all cost is a lose-lose situation. Public money has been used to develop these medical solutions. They must belong to the public domain," he said.

Dr Sharifa Ezat Wan Puteh, professor of Health Economics and Public Health of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, said the tug-of-war

over patents had been going on for a long time for cancer drugs, antibiotics and other vaccines.

"The current issue is that Covid-19 is hitting a lot of countries badly and the pandemic is so wide and has much impact on lower-income countries," she said.

Public health experts, she added, wanted to see as much access and treatment for everyone, which could be developed locally and hence improve access.

"We advocate this as much as possible but the holder of the patent still has the right to say they won't release it," she said.

Prof Dr Sharifa Ezat, however, noted that Malaysia as an upper-middle-income country would not qualify unless it faced a major crisis such as that experienced by India currently.



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