

IP essential part of vaccine development

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AS LIVES and livelihoods suffer from the Covid-19 pandemic, innovative pharmaceuticals companies wasted no time in stepping up to demonstrate that they are deeply aware of the responsibility they have to deliver science and solidarity.

Scientists in the private and public sectors as well as executives are working around the clock to develop a vaccine or effective, safe treatments to fight the virus.

In parallel, pharmaceutical companies have joined a unique partnership that aims to work together to find solutions to the tough questions, such as how to scale up manufacturing to meet the needs of the world as well as ensuring that no one is left behind.

While this work is being done and considerable resources spent, the oft-mentioned and unhelpful issue of waiving inventor's intellectual property (IP) rights is being touted as the solution to "increase access" to medicines and vaccines.

As the Innovative Pharmaceutical Association South Africa (Ipsasa), we strongly share the concerns about finding solutions to ensuring equitable and fair access to Covid-19 treatments and vaccines, but we believe the notion that IP is a barrier is not only incorrect but also misleading.

One of the reasons there are more than 157 treatments and 125 vaccines in development in just a matter of months is because there is such a strong innovative ecosystem involving academics, biotech companies and larger pharmaceutical companies.

Intellectual property rights are essential for continued innovation of new medicines and for the interests of our patients and society as a whole.

Ipsasa's companies have opened their compound libraries for any researcher to tap into, created patent pools and continue to push the boundaries of science in their efforts to develop workable solutions.

Patents and profits were never on any pharmaceutical company's mind to date. Not a single company has filed a patent for promising vaccine candidates, and that issue is only in the minds of those who are seizing the Covid-19 pandemic to push a long-held ideological agenda for a patent-free world.

As of May 1, 2020, there are more than 600 clinical trials testing Covid-19 treatments and vaccines, and nearly 20 clinical trials testing a vaccine. There are also more than 200 unique treatments being tested globally for Covid-19 and Covid-19-related complications; a little more than half (53%) are targeting the virus directly.

All this motivated by a strong sense of responsibility to act together, in partnership with the World Health Organization and governments, to support health systems across the world. This is not the time to undermine the importance of IP.

When we fail to protect, respect and enforce IP, it will lead to fewer incentives for pharmaceuticals to invest in new drug development.

This could have the unintended consequence of little or no hope for a cure and treatment of high-burden diseases such as HIV/Aids, cancer, malaria or TB. In addition, there will be no pipeline for the generic industry.

When IP is not enforced, it can also lead to exposure to counterfeit, falsified, untested, unsafe and ineffective medicines.