

Analysis: Pharma joins global health force

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 (UPI) -- When it comes to neglected diseases, the relationship between pharmaceutical companies and global health organizations -- once characterized by conflict -- has become more cooperative.

"Pharmaceutical companies are an essential element of the glue that keeps us together," said Peter Hotez, a tropical medicine professor at George Washington University and staunch advocate for neglected disease research.

"Without (pharmaceutical companies) providing us donated drugs, we would be dead in the water," he said Friday at a conference in Washington, D.C. launching a cooperative effort called The Global Network for Neglected Tropical Disease Control.

Neglected diseases are a list of 13 conditions that -- until recently -- received little attention because they affect almost exclusively the world's poor. They include ancient diseases like leprosy, river blindness, trachoma and hookworm.

The diseases impact 2.7 billion of the world's poorest people, killing 530,000 per year, although for most of them, treatments already exist and the disorders have long since been obliterated in the developed world.

Because those who suffer from the diseases cannot afford to pay for treatment, there is no commercial market. Instead, global health organizations have hashed out agreements with pharmaceutical manufacturers to provide treatments at little or no cost.

Unlike the AIDS arena -- where negotiations between manufacturers, non-governmental organizations and governments have, in the past, often been characterized by rancor, accusations and mistrust -- in the area of neglected diseases, pharma and health advocates are happy to admit they need each other.

"You can reach the poorest, but if we don't have the pill, what use is it reaching them?" said Uche Amazigo, of the African Programme for Onchocerciasis Control. Pharmaceutical companies "are the ones giving us the materials we need to reach the poorest."

Pharmaceutical companies had equally kind words for their partnering non-governmental organizations.

"(GlaxoSmithKline) has partnered closely with the World Health Organization and we will continue to work closely," said Mark Bradley of the company's Global Community Partnerships division.

"We have been successful because we work primarily with non-governmental organizations that are grassroots and deeply committed," said Andy Koval, CEO of MedPharm, which this year will give parasite treatments to 30 million children.

The cooperative relationship, however, does not mean that there is never any tension, said Robert Sebbag, vice president of the Solidarity Mission on Access to Medicine at Sanofi-Aventis.

Public opinion and pressure from global health groups eventually led to a "strong awareness in the pharmaceutical industry that we can't go on like that," he said.

The change has led to increased manufacturing and donation of treatments, but also evolution in the basic business model the companies use in terms of marketing and profitability.

With many diseases that affect the poor, the company has changed its strategy from selling relatively few pills at a high price to selling many pills at a very low price. It has also moved production of the diseases' treatments to factories in countries like Brazil where they are needed.

And the back and forth continues, Sebbag said. "It's not a love wedding, it's a reasonable wedding -- but we all know that reasonable weddings are much more effective."

The next frontier is cooperation between pharmaceutical competitors.

The philanthropic arms of the corporations are already in communication. Merck, one of the first companies to begin efforts to combat neglected diseases, helped other large corporations establish their own programs. Those companies, in turn, offered expertise to relative newcomer Johnson and Johnson when it began working on its program two years ago.

Merck helped competitor Pfizer establish its trachoma program, even when the two companies "were competing in the marketplace and (their) statins were head to head for a long time," said Brenda Colatrella, Senior Director in the Office of Contributions at Merck.

Private-private partnerships "will be the next step I am sure," said Sanofi-Aventis' Sebbag. "The first step was to do something. The next step is for pharmaceutical companies to work together."

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