

Medicine Sans Patent

WITH THE WTO–SPONSORED patent regime in force globally, in most third world countries, high prices block the access to urgently needed drugs. Pressure from government and civil society on pharma corporation has contributed to bringing down prices in some cases. But it is no answer to a burning issue. A better solution would be to develop crucial medications with public funds and without patent protection.

The fact is that there lies the scope to develop medicine without patents. And a voluntary organisation—The Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDI) has shown that their approach is viable. In league with pharma giant Sanofi-Aventis, it launched the world's first new medicine without patent protection in March. Following their footsteps a number of research institutes had cooperated to develop essential drugs without patent. Sanofi-Aventis is producing a malaria remedy in Morocco. They have promised to sell the medicine in 14 African countries at cost price. Because, there is no patent, other manufacturers could theoretically also produce the medicine and sell it at lower prices.

Most third world governments are trying to protect themselves from the patent onslaught by taking advantage of WTO rules that allow national governments to bypass patent protection if they see public health at risk. But drug multinationals do hardly bother about these WTO safeguards for the poor as the Abbott-Thai government dispute over a HIV/AIDS medication recently demonstrated though the Thai government followed the WTO guidelines in issuing *Kaletra*, a standard HIV cocktail, Abbott, the patent-holder had to finally retreat under pressure from different quarters.

The tragedy is that leftists in India who became vocal when the government of India passed the WTO prescribed patent law, fuelling abnormal price rise of essential drugs, did not explore the possibility of 'medicine sans patent'. Nor do trade unions operating in India's vast pharmaceutical industry, based mainly in the western region, ever raise the issue of patent. They are busy to protect their sectional interests. They have no concerns about high prices of drugs. Without a powerful mass movement for 'patentless medicine', the poor in most third world countries will be priced out of public medicare system. □□□