

News

US Presidential election: Fighting to the finish as a pandemic rages on

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Indian drug-makers, who account for 40% of the generic drugs in the US, closely watch the developments

From the fate of infectious diseases expert Tony Fauci to the fortunes of drug-makers in the US, healthcare watchers brace for an impact as the US Presidential race goes into a fight to the finish.

Healthcare has been integral to the promises made by US Presidential candidates. But this time, it unravelled against a grim backdrop. The US has the world's highest number of cases (93 lakh) and death toll (2,32,626) from the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

Against the pandemic backdrop, the US has been divided on issues ranging from a simple decision to wear a mask, to the more critical aspects of whether a vaccine against SARS-CoV-2 would be available before the election.

US President Donald Trump has been criticised by a section of scientific experts for his government's handling of the pandemic, even calling out his rallies for being 'super-spreader' events. In fact, the pandemic months have witnessed a roller-coaster ride due to Trump's statements, from a decision to stop funding to the World Health Organisation to batting for medicines such as hydroxychloroquine as a "game-changer" of sorts. The final leg of his campaign saw calls to "fire Fauci", the infectious diseases veteran respected across the world. On the opposing side, the Democrat Presidential candidate Joe Biden promises to fight the virus, listen to science, and make the vaccine free to all US citizens.

Pharma run-ins

There have been unprecedented joint statements by Big Pharma chief executives in the last few months, promising to not rush with a vaccine and pay attention to safety. President Trump signed four executive orders in July to get medicines for US citizens at the price they were sold in other countries. In his words, it aimed to "end global freeloading on the backs of American patients and American seniors. For decades, our citizens have paid the highest prices for drugs — prescription drugs — anywhere in the world..."

His statement was met with an equally ferocious push-back from Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA), calling the orders a "reckless distraction" and a "radical and dangerous" policy to pursue.

India watches

Indian drug-makers, who account for 40 per cent of the generic drugs in the US, are watching the developments. "India has a long-standing relationship with the US and it will continue to evolve," says

Sudarshan Jain, secretary general of the Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (representing large, domestic drugmakers), on whether companies may need to rework US strategies.

Responding to an analyst query, Sun Pharma Managing Director Dilip Shanghvi said that poll promises of both candidates indicate they intended to control drug prices. An opportunity could arise to negotiate on Medicare (their national health insurance programme), something that was not available earlier, he said, adding that much depended on how these ideas would be executed.

Drug-makers may need to have US manufacturing facilities for essential medicines like Covid-related therapies, said another industry veteran, pointing to the call for greater localisation. The pandemic has revealed flaws in being dependent on a single country for sourcing products. Both the US Presidential candidates will pursue a diversified sourcing approach, he said, indicating an opportunity for India. But the ground rules will become clear only after the US declares its next President and opens again for business, he added.

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