

WORLD

# Difficult way to remove vaccine copyright

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**While some experts oppose removing intellectual property rights with vaccines, others say it is necessary to get the world out of the pandemic.**

The fact that the US government, the world's largest economy, announced its support for the temporary suspension of intellectual property rights for the Covid-19 vaccine, which is considered a long step forward by supporters of this initiative, and an impetus force for the negotiation process on this issue among countries in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

However, the European Union (EU) last week submitted to the WTO a plan that it believes will expand vaccine production more effectively than stopping copyright protection.

The US government's decision is also considered a move to upset the balance of forces between opponents and supporters of giving up intellectual property rights with this most important medical product. However, given the EU's latest stance, the fate of this proposal remains unclear ahead of a meeting of WTO member ministers this November.

## **After copyright, there is technology**

Clete Willems, a former commerce official under Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, says that scrapping vaccine patents is an impossible solution, nor is it necessary.

"Many countries have licensed the technology and produced their own vaccines. Therefore, access to technology is not an issue. The problem lies in the infrastructure to produce them," he told *Zing* .

"Negotiations at the WTO are only aimed at removing the provision that forces countries to protect vaccine intellectual property. It does not force any company to share its technology," he expressed.

“In the best case scenario, facilities that don't yet have the technology can only start production after this year. This is a new technology, it is difficult for anyone to produce without experience,” he affirmed. “By then, maybe we'll have enough vaccine for the whole world.”

This expert said that the US needs to boost vaccine exports, and the country has the capacity to produce up to 10 billion doses of vaccine for the world, by the end of this year.

In contrast, Mr. Sudarshan Jain, Secretary General of the Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA), said that 10 billion doses of vaccine is not enough for the world.

“The United States cannot produce enough vaccines for the whole world. We need to optimize output,” he told *Zing* .

This Indian expert agrees that removing copyright protection is not enough, companies need both technology transfer, and enough materials to make vaccines. However, he said, if the WTO removes intellectual property rights with vaccines, companies will have an incentive to voluntarily transfer technology.

"We need to negotiate with individual companies to ramp up vaccine production around the world," he said.

Some Western pharmaceutical companies have already transferred the technology. AstraZeneca cooperates with Serum Institute of India, while Indian pharmaceutical company Dr Reddy's has produced the Russian vaccine Sputnik V. Instead of forcing copyright protection, voluntary technology transfers like this are working.



Clete Willems, a former commerce official under Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Photo: *Atlantic Council*.

On April 10, Chinese health officials confirmed that the country could produce up to 3 billion doses of the vaccine in 2021. Indian health officials also calculated that the country could produce more than two billion doses of vaccine from January 8 to December.

Navya Dasari, a member of the Student Union for Essential Medicines (UAEM), also said that the US move to support the proposal to encourage large pharmaceutical companies such as Moderna and Pfizer to voluntarily share vaccine knowledge and ramping up production.



Mr. Sudarshan Jain. Photo: *Economist Times* .

However, this depends on pressure from the international community and civil society organizations when negotiations take place. Some countries, under the influence of major pharmaceutical companies, will try to weaken the deal below what it actually works, she said.

### **Countries begin to share vaccines**

Mr. Willems said that the US's support for the removal of intellectual property was a more diplomatic move.

"The administration of President Joe Biden wants to show that it is more willing to cooperate in international organizations than the previous administration," he analyzed.

"The US also wants to signal that it is doing good to the world, in the context of China stepping up 'vaccine diplomacy.' In addition, President Biden is also under pressure from many other countries, as well as from some Democrats," said Mr. Willems.

On April 30, a majority of Democrats in the House of Representatives signed a letter calling on President Biden to temporarily remove intellectual property rights with vaccines to help developing countries produce more vaccines. .

Meanwhile, the US government has repeatedly stated that the country does not use vaccines to do diplomacy, or create tools to bind countries.

The United States pledged that by the end of June, it would share about 80 million doses of vaccine with the world. Last week, Washington announced the first batch of 25 million doses, of which 75% were distributed through the COVAX mechanism.

"Our country will become a vaccine stockpile for the rest of the world," President Joe Biden said on May 17.

Comparing the US to Russia and China, Mr. Biden asserted: "We will not use vaccines to seek support from other countries."

The EU also sets a target of at least 100 million more doses for low- and middle-income countries by the end of 2021.

In the long term, Navya Dasari believes that removing intellectual property rights will not harm pharmaceutical companies or reduce the incentive to innovate in this industry.

"Thanks to lucrative contracts and public financial resources for research, big pharmaceutical companies are reaping a lot of profits from the pandemic. They will still benefit in case developing countries can. self-produced vaccines," she said.

A recent Data for Progress survey found that 60% of Americans polled support removing intellectual property rights for all drugs used to save lives.

Dismantling intellectual property rights to vaccines, transferring technology and increasing production in developing countries will help promote health equality on a global scale, as well as set a precedent for international cooperation economy in the future.

"Intellectual property rights are fundamental in the medical industry. Without it, companies would not invest in research, development, and new product creation. We need to recognize and appreciate this. However, intellectual property rights need to be balanced against vaccine accessibility. Companies need to be profitable. But they also need to share with the people, instead of just aiming for profit," he said.