

A chance to save millions of lives by freeing up drug patents

Level 2 | Intermediate

1 Acronyms

Complete the table. The answers can be found in the text.

	ACRONYM	FULL FORM
1•	_____	human immunodeficiency virus
2•	_____	acquired immune deficiency syndrome
3•	TRIPS	_____
4•	TB	_____
5•	_____	World Trade Organisation

2 Key words

Fill the gaps using one of these key words from the text in each gap:

patent
radical

commission
innovation

bypass
disastrous

generic
wealthy

- 1• A group of people that is officially put in charge of something or is asked to report on something is called a _____.
- 2• _____ is the invention of new ideas, methods and equipment.
- 3• If something has _____ results it causes a lot of damage or harm.
- 4• _____ is another word for 'rich'.
- 5• A _____ is an official document that gives an inventor the right to make or sell an invention for a fixed period of time and prevents anyone else from making or selling it.
- 6• A _____ change is new and very different from the usual way of doing something.
- 7• If you _____ something, you avoid dealing with it.
- 8• A _____ drug is basically a copy and is one sold without a trademark.

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There is not much good news in the newspapers but occasionally something happens that can make even the most pessimistic person think that one day the world could be a better place.

Most people have probably missed what's happened because it is a "good news" story, so the headlines were small. But the consequences could be large. It could help save the lives of millions in the poor countries of Africa and in other parts of the world, who are under the death sentence of HIV infection. Medicines could keep them alive, but although those medicines have become much cheaper, they are still not cheap enough for someone who can hardly feed his or her family.

One thing that is preventing really low prices is the patent system. When they develop a new drug, the giant pharmaceutical companies get 20 years' protection, which means they can recover their costs through high prices and large profits. This is normal in the wealthy northern hemisphere but disastrous in the poor south.

For years the pharmaceutical companies and the governments of countries such as Britain and the United States have

insisted that the patent system is essential for the industry. They say that without the patent system there would be no money to research and develop new drugs. But last month a commission presented a report which states very clearly that patents can be bad for poor countries.

This report is remarkable for a number of reasons. On the commission on intellectual property rights there were lawyers, scientists and a bio-ethicist, but also a senior director from the drug company Pfizer. This suggests that the radical solutions in the report would not do such serious harm to the pharmaceuticals industry. Perhaps patents actually prevent innovation - even in the developed world. Sometimes they stop scientists exploring promising areas of research. Sometimes they force companies to fight in court and this can waste millions of dollars. And patents do not, and will not, persuade the drug companies to invent new medicines for diseases of poor people. The report says the only way to do that is to spend public money.

At the centre of the patent question is the trade and intellectual property rights agreement of the World Trade

Organisation. This agreement is due to be signed by the poorest countries by 2006.

The result of this will be to introduce to the poor southern nations a patent system which is designed to protect technologies and drugs in rich countries. The report says that poorer countries should be allowed to set their own levels of intellectual property protection. Most important of all, the report says that countries with serious diseases like AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis must be able to bypass patents. They should be able to make cheap generic versions of patented drugs themselves, and they should be able to buy generics made abroad if they cannot make them at home. The commission does not want to cause damage to the pharmaceutical industry. It says that patents are important and must be respected in wealthy countries.

Of course, the pharmaceuticals industry does not agree. "Patents are essential so that we can develop new medicines to fight disease in both the developed and developing world," responded a spokesman. The industry is probably putting pressure on politicians at this very moment. But the existence of this report suggests that there may have been a change of direction within government which will put people before the needs of the pharmaceuticals companies.

The Guardian Weekly 3-10-2002, page 24

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3 Comprehension check

Match the beginnings and endings of the sentences.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1• The news about the patent report only made small headlines because | a• they stop scientists exploring new areas of research. |
| 2• Many people will die of AIDS in Africa and in other parts of the world because | b• it will introduce an expensive patent system to those countries. |
| 3• The governments of rich countries defend the patents system because | c• should be respected in rich countries. |
| 4• Patents may prevent innovation because | d• it was a "good news" story. |
| 5• Patents are bad for poor countries because | e• should be able to buy them abroad. |
| 6• The TRIPS agreement will be bad for poor countries because | f• they say it provides the money for research and development. |
| 7• The report says countries with serious diseases | g• should be able to bypass patents. |
| 8• If poor countries cannot produce generic drugs themselves they | h• they provide the money to develop new medicines. |
| 9• The report says that patents | i• the drugs that could save them are too expensive. |
| 10• The pharmaceuticals industry says patents are essential because | j• they keep the price of drugs very high. |

4 Vocabulary work: Prepositions

Fill the gaps using an appropriate preposition.

- 1• Drugs companies can recover their costs _____ high prices and large profits.
- 2• The drug companies say the patents system is essential _____ the industry.
- 3• There would be no money for research and development _____ a patents system.
- 4• The report says patents are bad _____ poor countries.
- 5• The commission was composed _____ people from different sectors.
- 6• The solutions presented in the report would not do serious harm _____ the pharmaceutical industry.
- 7• The commission does not want to do damage _____ the pharmaceutical industry.
- 8• Drugs companies are putting pressure _____ politicians.

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5 Vocabulary work: Word formation

Complete the table

	VERB	NOUN
1•	recover	_____
2•	research	_____
3•	solve	_____
4•	explore	_____
5•	agree	_____
6•	introduce	_____
7•	sign	_____
8•	permit	_____
9•	develop	_____
10•	suggest	_____

6 Discussion

What are the points against ending patents from the point of view of the pharmaceuticals companies?

What are the points in favour of ending patents from the point of view of poorer nations?

What do you think is the solution to this problem?

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Key

1 Acronyms

- 1 HIV
- 2 AIDS
- 3 Trade and Intellectual Property Rights
- 4 Tuberculosis
- 5 WTO

2 Key words

- 1 commission
- 2 innovation
- 3 disastrous
- 4 wealthy
- 5 patent
- 6 radical
- 7 bypass
- 8 generic

3 Comprehension check

1 d; 2 i; 3 f; 4 a; 5 j; 6 b; 7 g; 8 e; 9 c; 10 h

4 Prepositions

- 1 through
- 2 to
- 3 without
- 4 for
- 5 of
- 6 to
- 7 to
- 8 on

5 Word formation

- 1 recovery
- 2 research
- 3 solution
- 4 exploration
- 5 agreement
- 6 introduction
- 7 signature
- 8 permission
- 9 development
- 10 suggestion