

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

Sarah Boseley

Level 3 | **Advanced**

1 Pre-reading | Vocabulary

Match the words from the text with their meanings below:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1• barrier | a• completely; one hundred per cent |
| 2• patent | b• to try to influence people in authority on a particular subject |
| 3• R&D | c• something that causes a lot of harm |
| 4• lock, stock and barrel | d• something sold without a trademark; a copy |
| 5• innovation | e• 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 doing so |
| 6• a generic drug (or other product) | f• most important; most basic; central |
| 7• scourge | g• the invention or use of new ideas, methods and equipment |
| 8• to lobby | h• to persuade someone to do something, often by offering an advantage or reward |
| 9• to entice | i• short for research and development |
| 10• core (adj) | j• something that prevents progress; an obstacle |

2 What do you know about pharmaceuticals and patents?

Decide whether these statements are true or false:

- 1• Drugs exist which could keep millions of HIV sufferers in poor countries alive.
- 2• The patent system means that drugs are very cheap in poor countries.
- 3• Patents last for 10 years.
- 4• Patents mean that generic versions of drugs may not be produced in poor countries.
- 5• The pharmaceutical industry is opposed to any changes to the current system.

Now read the text and check your answers.

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Every now and then something happens to make the most cynical of us think that maybe this could one day become a better world: that it's not naive to believe there could be justice, fair play and equal life chances for rich and poor.

Most people will have 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 elsewhere who are at the moment under the death sentence of HIV infection. Medicines could keep them alive, but although those medicines have come down

in price dramatically, they are not low enough for someone who can barely feed his or her family. One very important barrier to rock-bottom prices is the patent system. For developing a drug, the giant pharmaceutical companies are rewarded with 20 years' protection, enabling them to recoup their costs through high prices and substantial profits. Fair enough in the moneyed, northern hemisphere. But fatal in the South.

For years the pharmaceutical companies and the governments of countries such as Britain and the United States - which enjoy the taxes they pay and the jobs

they guarantee - have insisted that the patent system is the lifeblood of the industry. Without it there would be no R&D for new drugs. But last month a commission presented a report which states loud and clear that patents can be bad for poor countries.

All sorts of things are remarkable about this. On the commission on intellectual property rights sat not only lawyers, scientists and a bio-ethicist, but a senior director from the drug company Pfizer.

This person's core involvement suggests that the radical road the report lays out would not do such serious harm to the industry. It could be argued that patents do not necessarily encourage innovation - even in the developed world.

Sometimes they block scientists from going down promising avenues of research. Sometimes they force companies to fight each other in court, wasting potentially millions of dollars. Certainly they do not, and will not, entice 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 heart of the patent issue is the trade and intellectual property rights (Trips) agreement of the World Trade Organisation, which is due to be ratified by the poorest countries by 2006. Effectively, Trips transfers a patent

system designed to protect technologies and drugs in affluent northern countries lock, stock and barrel to the poor southern nations. Who has most to gain? The commission says that Trips is not always appropriate, and that poorer countries should be allowed

to set up levels of intellectual property protection that are right for them.

Most important, there have to be ways for poor countries with rampaging disease - not just Aids, but malaria, TB and others - to bypass patents. Not only should they be allowed to make cheap generic versions of patented drugs themselves, but they should also be permitted to buy generics made elsewhere if they do not have the capacity to make them at home. The commission is not preaching the overthrow of capitalism. It does not want to cause damage to the pharmaceutical industry. It says that patents are important and must be respected in wealthy countries, but that they operate against the interests of the poor, who must be allowed a way out. Of course, the industry does not agree.

"Patents are essential if new medicines are to be developed to fight disease in both the developed and developing world," responded the ABPI bluntly. No doubt ministers are being lobbied. But the fact that the report even exists hints that there may have been a shift in thinking within government - a willingness to put humanity ahead of the old cosiness with the drug giants.

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3 Comprehension Check

Choose the best answer according to the ideas expressed in the text:

1• The recent report from the commission on pharmaceutical patents:

- a• concluded that the patent system should continue in its present form.
- b• concluded that patents are bad for poor countries.
- c• attacked the pharmaceutical industry.

2• The patent system means that poor countries:

- a• are not allowed to produce drugs.
- b• are not allowed to copy drugs.
- c• cannot import drugs.

3• The pharmaceutical companies argue that patents are essential:

- a• to increase their profits.
- b• to guarantee more jobs.
- c• to provide funds for R&D.

4• Some people believe that patents discourage innovation because

- a• they waste millions of dollars.
- b• they prevent companies from inventing new medicines for poor people.
- c• they prevent scientists from following promising avenues of research.

5• The commission recommended that poor countries:

- a• should be able to buy expensive drugs at cheaper prices.
- b• should ignore patents.
- c• should be allowed to produce and import generic drugs.

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4

Find the word

1. Find three other words in the text that mean 'rich'.
2. Find an adjective which means the opposite of 'sky-high'.
3. Find an adverb which means the same as 'hardly'.
4. Find a verb which means 'to avoid dealing with someone or something'.
5. Find a verb which means 'to say what you are thinking or feeling in an indirect way'.
6. Find a verb which means 'to recover' or 'to get back'.
7. Find a verb which means 'to make an agreement official by signing it'.
8. Find an adjective which means 'deadly' or 'lethal'.

5 Collocations | Verb + Noun

Match these verbs from the text with the nouns they collocate with.

- | | |
|---------------|------------------|
| 1. to recoup | a. harm |
| 2. to develop | b. an agreement |
| 3. to do | c. losses |
| 4. to waste | d. disease |
| 5. to ratify | e. taxes |
| 6. to fight | f. lives |
| 7. to save | g. a new product |
| 8. to pay | h. money |

6 Discussion

Make a list of the points for and against the use of pharmaceutical patents. Make one list from the point of view of the pharmaceutical companies and the other from the point of view of the poor countries. What, in your view, is the solution to the problem?

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Key

1 Vocabulary

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

2 True or False?

1 T; 2 F; 3 F; 4 T; 5 T

3 Comprehension Check

1 b; 2 b; 3 c; 4 c; 5 c

4 Find the word

- 1 monied, affluent, wealthy
- 2 rock-bottom
- 3 barely
- 4 to bypass
- 5 to hint
- 6 to recoup
- 7 to ratify
- 8 fatal

5 Collocations

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