

Guest Column: Vaccinating the globe, one jab at a time

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The word "awesome" is overused. But few other words seem apt when describing the fact that the world has now administered more than 6 billion doses of the Covid-19 vaccines.

When you consider that the World Health Organization announced the discovery of the novel coronavirus on January 9, 2020, that's less than two years in which scientists have taken us from zero to 6,000,000,000 jabs. In terms of the sequence of medical research to clinical trials, then to FDA emergency use authorization and market placement, that's a sprint worthy of Usain Bolt.

What's more is the alacrity with which research companies rose to the occasion to fight Covid-19, a feat that offers the surest proof that IP protections help keep the world safe.

Getting a drug successfully to market can cost billions of dollars and take several years of scientific toil. Blood, sweat, tears -- and money. Fewer than one in 10 products that enter clinical trials are ever greenlit by the FDA. If those that succeed are stripped of proprietary protection, few investors would risk their money in pharmaceutical research and development.

And yet, the very safeguards that made it possible for Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson to give us life-saving vaccines are now threatened by our own, well-meaning government.

In May, the Biden administration announced that it would back a proposal at the WTO to waive all IP protection on the Covid-19 vaccines. Soon, these companies could find their painstaking research in the hands of governments who would be profiting from the work of our scientists. Among these governments is China, America's most fervent competitor, which has made no secret of its own ambitions to dominate the biotech sector.

The WTO proposal was submitted in September 2020 by India and South Africa, and has garnered the support of more than 100 countries and countless NGOs. That it was made three months before vaccines were authorized suggests it was a kind of preemptive strike. After resisting pressure for many months, the U.S. succumbed and offered support to the waiver.

With respect, I believe the administration made the wrong call and with no good progressive outcome or policy reason. The policy error of stripping IP protection from our biotech companies is compounded by the fact that the waiver will not increase the production of vaccines by a single dose. Every facility in the world that can safely make the vaccines is already running at full capacity. Nowhere else is there the ability to fabricate these complex vaccines.

In parallel to this regrettable waiver, the Biden Administration has started to disburse America's massive stockpile of Covid-19 vaccines to nations in need.

The U.S. has committed to donating more than one billion doses. That, surely, is the better way to help the world. As are the calls being made that rich countries pay for the vaccines that would go to the vaccine-deprived.

Let the governments of the West and Japan perform this service to humanity. That way, we can help protect those in crying need of vaccines without begging our own medicine-makers.

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