

WIPO - World Intellectual Property Organization

Intellectual Property Rights to Principal Medical Services and Technologies

Overview

The global debate surrounding intellectual property rights (IPRs) in the field of medical services and technologies has become one of the defining policy challenges of the 21st century. Originally designed to reward inventors and stimulate innovation, intellectual property protections play a central role in shaping global access to essential medicines and health technologies. However, when applied to crucial medical products, such as vaccines, antiretrovirals, diagnostic systems, and biotechnology platforms, these protections can severely limit availability and affordability, particularly in low-income regions. This tension has grown increasingly visible during major global health crises, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, in which patent restrictions contributed to unequal vaccine distribution and delayed access in developing regions. Scholars argue that the fundamental structure of medical innovation under strong IP regimes produces inherent inequalities that can only be addressed through meaningful regulatory reform. ¹

The dilemmas highlighted by recent health emergencies have generated pressing questions for policymakers and international organizations, especially WIPO: Should intellectual property rules be modified, relaxed, or suspended when global health is at risk? And if so, under what circumstances? These questions lie at the heart of the contemporary struggle to balance innovation incentives with the universal right to health.

The World Intellectual Property Organization

Founded in 1967 and headquartered in Geneva, WIPO is a specialized agency of the United Nations responsible for promoting the protection of intellectual property worldwide. With 193 member states, its mandate encompasses standard-setting, policy guidance, technical assistance, and international cooperation. Its work particularly intersects with that of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), especially through the TRIPS Agreement, which governs the global framework for patent protection.

Although WIPO's foundational goals emphasize harmonizing IP laws and fostering global innovation, the organization increasingly acknowledges that intellectual property governance must be viewed through a humanitarian lens. Emerging literature highlights how rightsholders' control over medical devices, technologies, and software can shape not only innovation incentives but also patient safety, health equity, and bioethical consideration.² As a result, WIPO must constantly navigate competing priorities: strengthening intellectual property systems on the one hand and ensuring that these systems do not undermine global health outcomes on the other.

Intellectual Property Rights in the Healthcare Sector

Intellectual property plays a fundamental role in the development of modern medical technology. Patents grant exclusive rights for new drugs, vaccines, surgical devices, or health software, enabling companies to recuperate high research and development costs. Copyrights govern digital health systems, medical databases, telemedicine platforms, and AI-driven diagnostics, while trademarks influence the distribution and market recognition of medical products across borders.

Yet, while these protections stimulate investment and innovation, they also create monopolies that can dramatically raise the cost of essential medicines. High licensing fees, restrictive patent enforcement, and legal threats against generic manufacturers all contribute to reduced affordability and delayed access. Analysts observe that these dynamics have profound consequences for healthcare systems, as they exacerbate inequities between high-income nations, with established pharmaceutical industries, and developing countries that depend on imported medications for survival. ³

This dynamic has become particularly concerning as countries confront rising costs for cancer therapies, antimicrobial agents, insulin, and biologic drugs, many of which remain locked behind patent barriers long after their initial development.

The Tension Between Intellectual Property and Global Health Access

The conflict between protecting intellectual property and ensuring global health equity is both structural and political. High-income nations with powerful pharmaceutical sectors typically advocate for strict IP enforcement, arguing that innovation depends on secure patent rights. Low- and middle-income countries, by contrast, often push for flexibility, especially during emergencies when the rapid production of affordable generics may be necessary to save lives.

Health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic vividly demonstrated how strict patent protections contribute to inequitable access. While wealthy nations secured early vaccine shipments, developing regions faced delays measured in months or years. In some cases, manufacturers were unable to produce their own versions of vaccines or therapeutics due to patent restrictions, lack of technology transfer, or pressure from patent-holding countries. Ethical concerns emerge when commercial considerations are prioritized over global public health

needs, especially when failing to distribute essential technologies accelerates disease transmission, increases mortality, and prolongs international crises.

Moreover, scholars emphasize that intellectual property restrictions on integrated medical devices, such as implantable or software-dependent monitoring systems, may limit competition, restrict maintenance or repair, and indirectly influence patient outcomes.² These concerns suggest that modern IP governance must consider not only innovation but also broader issues of safety, equity, and humanitarian responsibility.

Countries and Stakeholders Involved

A complex network of actors shapes the global landscape of intellectual property rights. Countries such as the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and Japan consistently advocate for strong patent systems, arguing that weakening IP protections would deter investment in medical research. Conversely, nations including India, South Africa, Brazil, and Thailand promote more flexible approaches, often championing compulsory licensing, patent waivers, and technology-sharing initiatives.

NGOs, civil society organizations, and health advocacy groups frequently challenge strict IP regimes, arguing that innovation cannot justify withholding lifesaving medical technologies from vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, WHO emphasizes equity in access, WTO regulates TRIPS compliance, and WIPO is tasked with balancing these interests within the international IP system.

Potential Solutions and International Strategies

As global health challenges intensify, policymakers have proposed numerous solutions to bridge the gap between innovation incentives and public health needs. TRIPS flexibilities,

including compulsory licensing, parallel importation, and temporary patent waivers, offer countries legal avenues to expand access to essential medicines during emergencies. Legal scholars emphasize that strategic use of these mechanisms is essential to ensuring that intellectual property law does not impede public health goals, particularly in regions with limited manufacturing capacity.⁴

Innovative models such as patent pools, voluntary licensing agreements, open-access research platforms, and government-funded public-private partnerships also represent promising pathways for balancing innovation with humanitarian obligations. These approaches encourage collaboration across states, corporations, and institutions, aiming to prevent public health emergencies from being exacerbated by preventable shortages of medical technologies.

Conclusion

Intellectual property rights remain critical to the functioning of modern medical innovation, yet their application to essential medical technologies presents profound ethical, economic, and humanitarian challenges. For WIPO, the central question is how to maintain a global intellectual property system that rewards creativity and scientific advancement while ensuring that these advancements are accessible to all. As the world continues to confront pandemics, antimicrobial resistance, and rising healthcare costs, the need for a more balanced approach to IP governance becomes increasingly urgent. Delegates must consider how their nations can contribute to a system that fosters innovation without sacrificing global health equity.

Questions to Consider

1. Should intellectual property protections be temporarily waived during global health emergencies, and what criteria should determine such waivers?

2. How does your country balance domestic pharmaceutical interests with its obligations to global health equity?
3. To what extent should WIPO prioritize access to essential medicines over the commercial rights of patent holders?
4. How can technology transfer and capacity-building be expanded without compromising innovation incentives?
5. What reforms if any, should be made to the TRIPS Agreement to better align intellectual property governance with international public health needs?

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