

France Assos Santé press release – 15 April 2020

Universal access to COVID-19 treatments: we need rapid action

As the SARS-CoV2 coronavirus epidemic continues to spread, the world's scientific community is actively searching for treatments. Although we have to be cautious as we wait for the evidence to come in from the clinical research, we must now urgently prepare the conditions to allow everyone access to treatments, where efficacy has been demonstrated. Every possible solution must be explored, in particular by drawing on experience and lessons from the past. We will not tolerate any rationing of access to care, whether in the North or the South.

The candidate treatments tested against COVID-19 are diverse. They include using drugs developed for other indications, treatments not yet commercialised, and others which are still in the development phase. Today, we are mainly focusing on the results of these clinical trials, which benefit from unprecedented levels of public funding. However, there are worrying signals alerting us to the many serious challenges to be faced.

The cost of future treatments, a critical variable in beating the pandemic

The costs of these future treatments, potentially varying widely according to their current positioning, are rarely discussed. Costs, however, will be a critical variable in securing universal access to treatment on a global scale. Battling epidemics in the past has shown us that any breakthrough is only a real advance if it is available to everyone.

In 1996, the long-awaited arrival of life-saving triple therapies for HIV/AIDS was accompanied by unacceptably unequal access to treatment. Only after the special session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 was a first significant step taken on access to treatment for the countries of the South, those most affected by the pandemic.

In 2014, the cost of new hepatitis C treatments led the French government to ration access, reserving the drugs for more than two years exclusively for people at an advanced stage of the disease. While costs have fallen sharply in some low-income countries due to the arrival of generic drugs, much still needs to be done to achieve universal access to these treatments so that the virus is effectively eradicated.

Research is progressing, international cooperation is regressing

Anticipating possible positive results from therapeutic trials in the treatment of COVID-19, France and Morocco are requisitioning stocks of Plaquenil, which is used for malaria and essential for treating chronic diseases such as lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. India is restricting the export of drugs and active pharmaceutical ingredients used to treat COVID-19 symptoms, in anticipation of a shortage of the active ingredients from China. National priority seems to have become the rule, whereas international solidarity on health is vital in the fight against the pandemic. Limits on the production of potential treatments are an extra obstacle to universal access in a market guided by supply and demand logic.

We can still prioritise access to care ahead of economic and financial interests, but it is now time to act.

France Assos Santé calls on the government to review all the existing international instruments and any proposal aimed at mass-producing low-cost medicines and vaccines¹. Existing price-setting mechanisms must finally be challenged, particularly in the light of public investment and funding for research and development.

Certain tools, such as patent pools and compulsory licensing, have already been used successfully, particularly to fight infectious diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, and hepatitis C; other tools are yet to be devised. Every avenue must be explored and every dogma overturned in this unprecedented global pandemic situation. France must take action at international level, but it must also set an example by using all appropriate means to oppose unfair and uncontrolled prices.

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¹ On 23 March, the President of Costa Rica wrote to the WHO Director-General to suggest pooling all available information and knowledge on health technologies to combat COVID-19 (particularly patents) and secure free or low-cost access in all countries.