

The pharmaceutical industry's response to the HIV/AIDS crisis

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Cynicism, criticism and contempt—when it comes to the media's portrayal of the pharmaceutical industry's efforts to help mitigate some of the developing world's worst health crises, these attitudes unfortunately still prevail.

Despite this, the world's foremost pharmaceutical companies remain more committed than ever to bringing relief to the suffering, particularly to those affected with HIV/AIDS in Africa.

These companies include the one I represent, GlaxoSmithKline, but also other manufacturers of antiretroviral products such as Bristol-Myers Squibb, Hoffman La Roche, Merck Frosst and Pfizer.

In this paper, I want to outline the challenges we all face in the AIDS struggle, our response to this growing crisis and what I believe the future holds for our work. I also want to highlight some of the key initiatives—both in and out of the lab—that we have all undertaken over the past few years.

The crisis

As you know, the current HIV/AIDS figures are staggering. Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Secretary of UNAIDS, the joint United Nations program on HIV/AIDS, has noted that AIDS continues to spread in every region of the world, but most notably in Africa where nearly 30 million people—out of an estimated 45+ million people worldwide—are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Most of them are unaware of their HIV status.

Extreme poverty and its side effects—lack of access to basic health care, medicines, education and prevention programs—are among some of the reasons behind the African AIDS epidemic. These are also the same factors that make finding solutions to the crisis so difficult and complex.

There has been much debate on how to best deal with the AIDS problem. The argument—re-stated as early as last week in a *Medical News Today* article entitled “Prices of AIDS Medicines in Developing Countries Still a Concern”—has been that if only the pharmaceutical industry provided Africa with low-cost medicines, the AIDS epidemic would be stopped.

If only this were true.

Unfortunately, flooding Africa with low-cost antiretroviral drugs would not even begin to address the much deeper and more complex issues. The World Health Organization has estimated that more than two billion people in the developing world do not receive vital medicines due to drug diversion, distribution and administration difficulties.

Of those who do receive medicines, there are often issues with drug adherence, drug resistance and general follow-up to ensure they continue taking the medications for life. Add to that political and military instability, constantly changing economic policies and insufficient healthcare funding, and one can begin to get a sense of the enormity of this public health issue.

Current efforts

Despite these challenges, GlaxoSmithKline and other pharmaceutical companies continue to play a key role in addressing the healthcare problems of the developing world by taking an innovative, responsible and above all, sustainable approach to the crisis.

A number of basic principles underpin GlaxoSmithKline's contribution to this effort. First, our approach is long-term, for both the company and for patients. We have a duty to ensure our products are used in a clinically appropriate way in all countries where they are available. Our activities are also undertaken in partnerships with established organizations such as governments, international agencies, charities and academic institutions. And we support intellectual property protection because it stimulates and sustains the continued research and development of new and better medicines.

As such, we and others are making vital contributions in the following four areas:

Preferential pricing for our medicines

In an effort to give the world's poorest countries access to the medicines they vitally need, several companies now provide not-for-profit medicines,

GlaxoSmithKline pioneered not-for-profit preferential pricing for HIV/AIDS medicines in 1997. Today, our AIDS medicines are available to public sector customers and not-for-profit organizations in over 100 countries. As well, all private employers in sub-Saharan Africa who provide care and treatment to their uninsured staff can purchase our antiretrovirals at not-for-profit prices. Our prices are sustainable, which means we do not make a profit on them but we do cover our costs, which in turn ensures we can sustain supply of these high-quality medicines for as long as they are needed.

In addition, our not-for-profit prices are comparable with the cost of generic drugs. Combivir, our leading antiretroviral, is available at US65c per day including delivery costs. The February 2005 pricing report by Médecins Sans Frontières shows that the average cost of generic equivalents is US75c a day.

Investment in research and development

Many companies, including Merck Frosst, Bristol-Myers Squibb and Pfizer, have turned their efforts to combating diseases of the developing world, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

GlaxoSmithKline has a facility in Spain solely focused on researching new medicines to treat these diseases. In fact, we have the industry's most extensive portfolio of research and development projects aimed at the diseases of the developing world.

For many years, our medicines have formed the core of HIV/AIDS treatment guidelines around the world. GlaxoSmithKline also remains among the industry's leaders in research into HIV/AIDS treatment and currently has three major clinical development programs, each targeting a different mode of action. They include the production of a drug that would be taken just once a day and the development of a vaccine to prevent AIDS infection.

Investment in community, education and healthcare initiatives

Bristol-Myers Squibb has a program called *Secure the Future*, a community outreach and education initiative that aims to help women and children with AIDS. Through its *AmpliCare* program, Hoffman LaRoche delivers HIV viral load tests to sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa, as well as education to local doctors and nurses on the latest advances in HIV/AIDS care. And Merck Frosst's *African Comprehensive HIV/AIDS Partnerships in Botswana* support and enhance that country's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic through a comprehensive approach to prevention, care and treatment.

These are just a few examples of the industry's efforts to provide not just medicines, but also long-term initiatives that foster knowledge and effective health care.

Positive Action is GlaxoSmithKline's international program of HIV education, care and community support. Through the program, we work in partnership with individuals, community groups, healthcare providers, governments, international agencies and others, in order to pursue the common goals of more effective HIV prevention, education, enhanced care and support for people living with, or affected by HIV/AIDS. Since its inception in 1992, *Positive Action* has supported and implemented dozens of projects at both a national and international level, throughout the world.

Innovative partnerships and voluntary licensing

To reflect the gravity of the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa, GlaxoSmithKline granted its first voluntary licence in October 2001 to Aspen Pharmacare, sub-Saharan Africa's

largest generics company, for the manufacture and sale of versions of GlaxoSmithKline's AIDS medicines. In 2004, the company granted five new voluntary licences to African companies.

GlaxoSmithKline is prepared, in appropriate circumstances, to grant other voluntary licences. Licensees, however, must be able to ensure the sustainability of the supply of quality products; that the medicines will be used safely; and that they will be able to protect products against diversion.

In July 2004, our company and Boehringer Ingelheim also agreed to assess the development of co-packaging for our respective antiretrovirals, for use in developing countries. Given the complexities of HIV treatment, we recognize the need for multiple treatment options and support efforts to simplify treatment regimens.

The future

The initiatives I have described above are only the most significant ones—there are hundreds of other programs and efforts taking place all over Africa today that are supported by the pharmaceutical industry and which are producing real results for patients.

Personally, I believe that we can and will defeat HIV, but it will require a different way of thinking. More financial resources are needed to improve Africa's health infrastructure, such as hospitals, clinics and drug distribution networks, so that medicines will more readily reach patients.

African countries also need to show genuine political commitment to addressing the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS, removing import tariffs that raise prices, driving out inefficiencies in the procurement, storage, prescribing and use of drugs, and prioritizing health care in national budgets to deliver as much money as possible to reinforce the funding coming from international sources.

Generic drug makers do have an important role in addressing the AIDS crisis. But it would be counter-productive to ignore or undermine the role of the research-based industry. The fundamental truth about AIDS is that we need new medicines and vaccines. We do not yet have a cure for AIDS, nor a vaccine for AIDS. Existing medicines will become increasingly less effective as resistance to them develops. Intellectual property protection is of critical important to the research and development-based industry. If there is no intellectual property protection, there will be no research and development and without this, there will be no new medicines or vaccines.

It is my view that only a holistic approach that embraces both prevention and treatment will beat this epidemic. In this approach, medicines will play a supporting role in a comprehensive program of prevention, health education, screening diagnosis and treatment, community care and support.

The global community—of which the pharmaceutical industry is just one member—must provide political will, a significant mobilization of additional resources and a spirit of partnership if we are to see an improvement in the health care and quality of life not just in Africa, but across the developing world.

At GlaxoSmithKline, we believe we are playing our part. We will continue with our efforts, improving our initiatives by applying lessons learned to date, and by constantly looking for opportunities to do more.

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