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STORY - 08/09/2022

Civil society gets its chance to review EU work on Covid vaccines

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EUROPEAN UNION

CORONAVIRUS

BRUSSELS, 8 Sep (APM) - The voice of consumers and civil health organisations was heard on Wednesday in the continuing European Parliament inquest into the EU response to Covid, bringing sharp reminders not only of the public health emergency, but also of the inequalities that the pandemic highlighted.

Urgent action is essential to ensure that people in Europe and beyond are better protected in future, the parliament's special committee on Covid was told.

There were expressions of recognition, even admiration, for the role played by the European Medicines Agency, for the potential of the HERA emergency response authority and for the de-risking and speeding up of research that advanced purchase agreements offered.

TIGHTER REGULATION AND IP

But there were calls for a firmer regulatory and pricing context and for tighter limits on companies' ability to profit through intellectual property protection.

Ancel.la Santos of European consumer group BEUC argued for the continuation and improvement of advanced purchasing agreements and joint procurement.

But she said it was "shocking" that companies were not required to share intellectual property (IP) and know-how in return for public money in support of R&D and production.

Companies like Pfizer and Moderna made billions in profits "thanks to their monopolies", she said, suggesting that governments overpaid for their vaccines.

Rosa Castro of the European Public Health Alliance echoed the call for tougher conditions to public investments so as to guarantee affordability and access to products

HERA should be developed explicitly to serve patients and promote public health, she said, arguing that excessive prices and over-reliance on a single source contributed to shortages.

GLOBAL ACCESS

Both speakers made the case for higher priority to be given to equitable access to vaccines worldwide.

They stressed the need for vaccines to be treated as global public goods, arguing that global access must be accepted as crucial for an effective pandemic response and out of respect for EU values.

Santos claimed that poor management of the conditions for contracts led to insufficient vaccine production, global inequity and unnecessary suffering.

Castro offered a reminder that EU and many national leaders "committed to contribute to global access to vaccines worldwide and promised that Covid vaccines would be treated as global public goods, meaning that they would benefit everyone around the world".

"Learning from the pandemic will require the integration of EU policies that have an impact on global access to medicines. From the new EU global health strategy to the negotiation position of the EU on a potential Pandemic Treaty, it will be important to avoid that trade and industrial policies come before health. Safeguards to protect public health and the public interest are a crucial part of the balance between innovation incentives and access to affordable medicines."

FUTURE APPROACHES

Many of the ad hoc mechanisms created during the pandemic require legislative backing, the committee was told.

The EMA should be able to break down research silos and promote better and larger clinical trials to assess evidence and safety.

Transparency needs to be built into advance purchase agreements, covering negotiations and contracts with details of investments, costs and prices, as well as liability and IP provisions.

Research grants and advance purchase agreements should go hand in hand with requirements to share IP and know-how.

Santos also urged the creation of a network of non-profit pharmaceutical undertakings to boost production of medical counter measures, particularly for products of less commercial interest.

Both BEUC and EPHA confirmed their readiness to cooperate in improving EU responsiveness.

As Castro put it: "We have a collective responsibility to identify and assess what did not work well, not to blame this on anyone but rather to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future."

The special Covid committee is in a position to shed light "and open the door for more efficiency along with more transparency, accountability, and global solidarity", she said.

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perter.odonnell@apmnews.com

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