

## Government urged to prioritise access to COVID supplies and vaccine ahead of trade rules

“Working in cancer, every day I see the suffering and concern caused by unrestricted pharmaceutical pricing. Because of IP rules, whānau are being charged a King’s ransom for medicines that will help keep their loved ones alive.

Now there is the chance this will be repeated across the whole of society, as corporations seek to profit from tests and treatments for COVID-19”, warns Dr George Laking, a medical oncologist from Whakatohea speaking on behalf of Doctors for Healthy Trade.

As countries search for a treatment or vaccine for COVID-19, New Zealand needs to ensure access to affordable supplies from offshore, without being held to ransom by pharmaceutical companies or waiting in a long queue behind countries with more influence or deeper pockets.

Two open letters, signed by international and national organisations, have been sent to the Minister of Health and Minister of Trade this week urging them to address concerns that the World Trade Organization’s intellectual property rules could prevent New Zealand’s ability to secure affordable access to medical supplies, especially vaccines and potential medicines to treat COVID-19 that are currently being developed.

[One letter](#) was addressed to a small group of countries, including New Zealand, who pledged back in 2003 not to use flexibilities in the WTO agreement on intellectual property that would allow them to import medicines made under compulsory licences in another country, even in a medical emergency.

“It is totally irrational for New Zealand to keep its own hands tied, as it prepares to meet the COVID-19 needs of its population, by voluntarily shutting itself off from patented ingredients, components, and essential medical products and supplies”, says Prudence Stone, CEO of the Public Health Association of New Zealand, who co-signed the letter with Sarah Dalton, the Executive Director of the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS).

“New Zealand needs to notify the WTO that it will now import medicines made under compulsory licence elsewhere”

The [second letter](#), signed by nearly 300 international organisations including Médecins sans Frontières Access Campaign, Public Services International and Oxfam International, as well as the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, Doctors for Healthy Trade, the Public Health Association, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation, called on WTO Members to stop trying to negotiate new agreements by the Internet, in which developing countries could not effectively take part:

*“The **first and only priority** for trade negotiators at this time should be to remove all obstacles, including intellectual property rules, in existing agreements that hinder timely and affordable access to medical supplies, such as lifesaving medicines, devices, diagnostics and*

*vaccines, and the ability of governments to take whatever steps are necessary to address this crisis. ...*

*We call on WTO Members to ensure that all countries have the flexibilities to set aside trade rules that constrain their ability to resolve the pandemic crisis, without fear of repercussions, and to cease other negotiations and activities that divert their energy and resources from that goal.”*

The signatories called for a fundamental rethink of the kind of trade rules that encourage such monopolies and put people’s lives at risk in every country of the world.

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