

WHO-WIPO-WTO Trilateral Symposium on Public Health, Intellectual Property and Trade
Geneva, Switzerland
31 October 2019

My brother Roberto, my brother Francis,

Distinguished participants, colleagues and friends,

First of all, I'd like to thank WTO for hosting this year's Symposium to mark the 10th anniversary of the trilateral cooperation between WHO, WIPO and the WTO.

Our decade of collaboration exemplifies the type of close cooperation across policy domains that is essential for tackling global public health challenges, and for achieving the healthier, safer, fairer and more prosperous world we all want.

The theme of this year's Symposium, "Cutting-Edge Health Technologies: Opportunities and Challenges," underscores the power of science, technology, and innovation for improving health.

Advances in science and technology are opening up new horizons in public health that were considered science fiction not so very long ago.

CRISPR tools enable us to edit the human genome, potentially transforming the treatment of diseases like cancer.

Robotic surgery is improving precision and making complex and intricate procedures easier.

3-D printing means orthotics and prosthetics can be tailored precisely to the individual.

Virtual reality is being used to train health workers.

Wireless brain sensors are giving us new insights into our most important but most mysterious organ.

Telemedicine and mobile health are helping us to deliver care in people's homes, instead of in hospitals and clinics.

Artificial intelligence is being used to give paraplegic patients improved mobility, to manage road traffic and to develop new medicines.

And machine learning is helping us to predict outbreaks.

Science and technology are developing faster than the legislation can keep up, with significant ethical and social implications. We, as a global community, must not fall behind or become out-of-date.

That's why, as part of WHO's transformation, we have created a new Science Division, including a new department of digital health, to ensure we anticipate and stay ahead of the curve on the latest scientific developments.

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Although the particular technologies I mentioned are new, the pattern is not.

Advances in science and technology have always been the engine of advances in human health.

Think of penicillin, vaccines, anesthesia or the MRI. None of us can imagine health care without them, and yet at one point they were all considered cutting edge.

These advances have had a profound impact on human health. Life expectancy has increased dramatically.

And yet we continue to live in a world marked by shocking inequality.

People in high-income countries live an average of 18 years longer than those in low-income countries.

And although more and more people have access to health services and products, they are paying more and more out of their own pockets to use them.

930 million people spend more than 10% of their household income on health care.

Medicines are a significant driver of this out-of-pocket spending.

This is not just an issue for low-income countries. It affects all countries.

High prices and rapidly-changing markets place increasing pressure on the financial sustainability of health systems globally, and on their ability to provide full and affordable access to quality care.

With ageing populations and increasing demand for long-term care, these challenges will only become more acute, not less.

That's why WHO's top priority is universal health coverage, including access to medicines and vaccines.

At the United Nations General Assembly last month, all 193 UN Member States approved the political declaration on universal health coverage, the most comprehensive international health agreement in history.

The declaration is based on the common conviction that health is a human right for all people, not a privilege for the few.

No one should get sick or die just because they are poor, or because they cannot access the products or services they need.

But how do we realise that vision?

How do we harness the power of innovation to narrow inequalities, rather than widen them?

To do that, we must understand the complex links between innovation, public health, intellectual property rights, and trade.

We must understand better the benefits, costs and limitations of mechanisms for incentivizing innovation and their impacts on the pricing of health products.

WHO is committed to a comprehensive health systems approach to improving access.

This is something our Member States are asking for.

Many World Health Assembly resolutions request WHO to address the impact of intellectual property protection and trade agreements on public health and access to medicines and health products.

In May this year, WHO's Member States approved a resolution on improving the transparency of markets for medicines, vaccines, and other health products.

In response, WHO is working to determine the patent status of health products, including publicly available user-friendly patent status information databases.

We are committed to working with international organizations like WIPO, WTO and others to improve international cooperation and avoid duplication of work.

We're committed to working together more closely to create sustainable opportunities for economic AND social prosperity for all.

Our vision is a world in which everyone, everywhere enjoys the fruit of scientific research and innovation, including cutting-edge technologies such as CRISPR, CAR-T therapy, new cancer medicines and more.

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Dear colleagues and friends,

Let me finish with three areas in which I believe we can work together in the next 10 years to leverage the power of our three organizations to make a real impact in the lives of the people we serve.

First, joint commitment to people.

Our starting point must be a common conviction that health is a human right, and a shared purpose to use the tools of trade and intellectual property to defend that right by overcoming barriers to access, rather than erecting them.

Second, joint effort.

None of us can achieve our aims alone. We need each other. We must work together. One concrete area of cooperation is on working together to improve the transparency of pricing for medical products.

And third, joint support for countries.

Joint commitment. Joint effort. Joint support.

With these three pillars of our partnership, we can truly make the world a healthier, safer, fairer place.

Thank you so much.

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