

Opinion: A patent-free ‘people’s vaccine’ is not the best way to help poor countries

Opinion by the [Editorial Board](#)

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THE WORSENING global pandemic, with the virus surging not only in India but also in [Brazil](#), Turkey, Iran, [Argentina](#) and elsewhere, has stirred outrage over the lack of vaccines in the developing world. Rich countries are inoculating millions of people, while poor countries wait in agony and anxiety. This has given fresh impetus to demands that patent protection be temporarily stripped from vaccines to deliver everyone a free “[people’s vaccine](#).”

The goal is noble, but the demand is more slogan than solution. What the world needs are political leaders prepared to make hard, emergency decisions to stop viral transmission, such as immediate lockdowns, and renewed leadership from the United States and other rich nations to help accelerate global vaccine production and sharing, which will save lives later. Better than the chimera of a “people’s vaccine” are doses of vaccines that are proven safe and efficacious against the virus and capable of protecting against the growing list of variants.

This week, renewed attention is focused on an [effort](#) spearheaded by [India](#) and South Africa, and supported by more than 50 nations as well as nongovernmental organizations and a large group of [Democrats in Congress](#), to [waive](#) World Trade Organization protections on intellectual property in hopes of [disseminating vaccine technology](#) more widely. At issue are protections covering copyrights, industrial designs, patents and trade secrets. The Post’s Dan Diamond and Jeff Stein report the Biden administration is divided over the idea, and the new U.S. trade representative, Katherine Tai, is studying it in advance of WTO [meetings](#) this week.

It is true that pharmaceutical companies stand to profit handsomely from monopolies on individual patented vaccines. It is also true that stripping away their intellectual property now could discourage future innovation. The U.S. government spent some \$10 billion in Operation Warp Speed to help that effort, among other things, but did not require companies to turn over their intellectual property to the government — or to share it.

The most salient fact is that patents on vaccines are not the central [bottleneck](#), and even if turned over to other nations, would not quickly result in more shots. This is because vaccine manufacturing is exacting and time-consuming. Look at the [production difficulties](#) encountered by Emergent BioSolutions, a vaccine manufacturer in Baltimore, where 15 million doses were contaminated. That was caught before the shots were distributed, but one can imagine the horrific consequences of a failure to maintain quality control elsewhere in the world.

Far more useful than stripping the patents would be a concerted U.S. effort to [share](#) manufacturing know-how, experienced personnel, quality control methods, oversight and [raw materials](#). The U.S. manufacturers should be encouraged to strike licensing deals, too, in order to speed production in qualified facilities elsewhere. The United States also should share its sizable vaccine surplus with the world, beyond those doses already pledged to Canada and

Mexico. The Covax Facility for poorer nations, now crimped by supply interruptions from India, urgently needs [20 million doses](#) in the next few months. This is how rich countries can really help the poorer ones.

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