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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Pharma to the Rescue

Advances in drug research mean a vaccine for the coronavirus could be in human trials by April.

By [The Editorial Board](#)

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The Johnson & Johnson campus in Irvine, California.

PHOTO: MARIO TAMA/GETTY IMAGES

The World Health Organization on Thursday declared China's novel coronavirus a global health emergency, though governments and businesses have already been mobilizing against the contagion. And look who's on the front lines—evil U.S. drugmakers.

The coronavirus originated late last year in Wuhan but is rapidly spreading and has infected more than 8,200 people—more than the deadly SARS virus in 2002-2003. More than 15 countries have confirmed cases, and many airlines have suspended flights to China to limit the contagion.

The good news is that the coronavirus so far appears less deadly than SARS. Immunology has also advanced by leaps and bounds, so treatments and vaccines should be available much sooner. Several U.S. drugmakers including [Johnson & Johnson](#), [Moderna Therapeutics](#) and [Inovio Pharmaceuticals](#) are already working with the National Institutes of Health on vaccines.

It took scientists 20 months to develop a SARS vaccine to test on humans, but the NIH hopes to have a vaccine ready for human trials by April. While tens of thousands more may get sick in the meantime, U.S. drugmakers are donating antiviral medicines that may fight the virus.

AbbVie and J&J are shipping HIV treatments to China while Gilead is studying whether an experimental antiviral drug that has worked on other coronaviruses in animal trials could help. Merck is also reviewing research to see if any of its drug compounds can be repurposed.

All of this is worth pointing out as politicians on both sides of the aisle denounce drugmakers as parasites on society. While hard to estimate, the public health dividends from drugmakers' research and development often exceed their commercial profits.

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