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The Crossroad between Intellectual Property and Clinical Trials: Balancing Incentives for Innovation with Access to Healthcare

Hmna Ahmad[1], Ifrah Shabbir[1*], Irfana Iqbal[2], Muhammad Masoom Akhtar[3]

[1] Dr. Ikram-ul-Haq Institute of Industrial Biotechnology (IIIB), Government College University Lahore (GCUL) Katchery Road, Lahore 54000, Pakistan; ifrahshabbir0303@gail.com
[2] College of Life Science and Engineering, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Mianyang Sichuan, 621053, China; Irfkhn@gmail.com
[3] Faculty of Pharmacy, Hamdard University Islamabad Campus, 4 Park Link Road, Park Road, Islamabad, Pakistan; m.masoom@hamdard.edu.pk
* Correspondence: ifrahshabbir0303@gmail.com

Abstract: The interplay between intellectual property rights (IPRs) and clinical trials presents a complex challenge in the realm of healthcare innovation. This paper examines the critical role of IPRs, particularly patents, in incentivizing pharmaceutical research and development while simultaneously addressing their implications for access to essential medicines, especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). We explore the phases of clinical trials that underpin medical advancements and highlight the significant financial and temporal investments required for drug development. The discussion also delves into the tensions created by monopolistic pricing, data exclusivity, and evergreening practices that hinder equitable access to healthcare. Through a review of international agreements like the TRIPS Agreement and case studies on HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C treatments, and COVID-19 vaccines, we illustrate the urgent need for policy reforms and alternative incentive models, including prize funds, patent pools, and tiered pricing strategies. Our findings underscore the necessity for a balanced approach that fosters innovation while ensuring that life-saving medications are accessible to all populations. Ultimately, this paper calls for collaborative efforts among governments, international organizations, and the private sector to create an equitable healthcare landscape that prioritizes public health needs without stifling innovation.

Keywords: intellectual property rights; health; clinical trials; pharmaceutical; licensing; patents

1.Introduction

The intersection of intellectual property (IP) rights and availability to medicines represents a critical issue in modern healthcare, particularly within the pharmaceutical industry. IP rights, especially patents, are designed to foster innovation by granting companies temporary monopolies over their inventions. These safeguards encourage companies to allocate resources toward research and development (R&D) and conduct expensive clinical trials, which are vital to bringing new medicines to market (Hettinger 1989). However, the monopolistic nature of these rights often leads to high drug prices, creating barriers to affordable healthcare and raising concern over global health equity, particularly in low-income nations (Kesselheim et al. 2007).

Clinical trials are a fundamental part of the drug development process, and their costs are substantial. Companies that invest in these trials expect a return on their investments through market exclusivity granted by patents and other IP mechanisms (Light and Lexchin 2012). For pharmaceutical companies, these protections are essential, as they safeguard the immense financial risks involved in bringing a drug to market. However, these monopolies can lead to increased costs for vital medications, limiting availability for vulnerable populations. This was notably observed during the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, where high prices for antiretroviral drugs exacerbated the health emergencies in low- and middle-income states (Hubbard and Love 2004).

The issue of IP besides healthcare access is especially pertinent in the context of catastrophic health expenditures, which occur when individuals or households are forced to allocate a significant portion of their income to medical costs, often due to the high prices of patented drugs (Jung and Kwon 2015). The monopolistic nature of pharmaceutical patents frequently results in higher costs for life-saving treatments, forcing many individuals into financial hardship. According to Sell (2003), the relationship between IP rights and catastrophic healthcare expenditure has highlighted the ethical dilemma inherent in the current IP framework, which prioritizes profit over equitable access. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the growing conflict between IP rights and worldwide health demands. The rapid development of vaccines was spurred by the promise of exclusive IP rights;

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however, the unequal distribution of these vaccines has sparked debates about whether IP protections should be relaxed in the face of global health emergencies (Morten and Moss 2020). Wealthy countries secured the bulk of vaccine doses, while many low-income nations were left without adequate supplies, underscoring the global disparity in availability to medication driven by IP protections.

In light of these challenges, initiatives like The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health seeks to offer legal leeway for nations to grant obligatory licenses, enabling the manufacture of more affordable generic alternatives to patented medicines during health crises (Hubbard and Love 2004). This mechanism offers a potential between encouraging innovation and guaranteeing affordable availability to indispensable medications particularly during crises. While IP rights are fundamental in fostering innovation and enabling the creation of new drugs, they can also serve as an obstacle to affordable healthcare, especially for lower-income populations. Current study aimed to explore the ongoing tension between these two competing interests—innovation and access—suggests the need for continued policy reforms that ensure equitable access to medicines without undermining the incentives that drive pharmaceutical innovation.

2. Intellectual property rights (IPRs) in healthcare

Patents are the most significant form of IPR in healthcare, particularly for pharmaceuticals, where they grant exclusive rights to companies for up to 20 years. This exclusivity encourages innovation by allowing firms to recoup the significant charges of research and development (R&D), together with expensive clinical research studies (Hettinger 1989, Light and Lexchin 2012). Patents create a temporary monopoly, enabling companies to set higher prices for drugs without competition. However, this monopoly often conflicts with public health goals, as the high cost of patented medicines limits access in low-income regions (Kesselheim et al. 2007, Jung and Kwon 2015). Besides patents, data exclusivity is another form of IPR that prevents competitors from using clinical trial data to gain regulatory approval for generics. This can delay the entry of lower-cost generics, which would improve access to affordable drugs (Jung and Kwon 2015). Data exclusivity often extends beyond the patent period, further extending the market exclusivity of the original drug, thus limiting competition and maintaining high prices (Kapczynski et al. 2012).

The monopolistic pricing allowed under IPRs often leads to situations where essential medications are out of reach for many communities, especially in low- and middle-income nations. The limited availability of affordable generic versions of drugs is a crucial barrier to equitable availability to medication (Hubbard and Love 2004). A notable example is the HIV/AIDS crisis, where patented antiretroviral drugs were initially too expensive for many developing countries, leading to significant public health consequences (Jung and Kwon 2015, Kesselheim et al. 2007). The World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement contains clauses for obligatory licensing, permitting governments to override patent protections during public health emergencies. This provision facilitates the manufacture of more affordable generic alternatives to patented medications, thereby enhancing access to essential medicines (Hubbard and Love 2004). Countries like Brazil and South Africa have used compulsory licensing to produce affordable versions of HIV/AIDS medications, showcasing how flexible IP policies can balance innovation with public health needs (Jung and Kwon 2015, Light and Lexchin 2012).

IPRs in healthcare have contributed to global health disparities, particularly between high-income and low-income countries. While wealthier nations have the resources to afford expensive patented drugs, poorer nations often face limited access, exacerbating healthcare inequalities (Hubbard and Love 2004, Morten and Moss 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted these disparities, with high-income nations obtaining the majority of vaccine supplies under IP protections, while low-income nations struggled to acquire sufficient supplies (Morten and Moss2020).The TRIPS Agreement establishes global benchmarks for intellectual property protection while incorporating clauses that address public health emergencies, enabling nations to grant compulsory licenses or implement alternative strategies to ensure access to essential medicines (Jung and Kwon 2015). The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement reaffirmed the authority of countries to prioritize public health and promoted the use of flexible IP measures, particularly in crises like the HIV/AIDS pandemic and COVID-19 (Hubbard and Love 2004).

Pharmaceutical firms frequently employ "evergreening" tactics by introducing slight modifications to existing medications in order to prolong their patent safeguards. This delays the entry of generics and prolongs monopolistic pricing, creating additional barriers to drug affordability(Kapczynski et al. 2012). Patent thickets, a collection of overlapping patents on a single drug, further complicate efforts to introduce generics, maintaining high costs for essential treatments (Maggiolino 2011). Policymakers and global health organizations continue to debate how to balance IP protections with public health needs. Reforms are needed to ensure that innovation incentives provided by IPRs should not be achieved at the expense of equitable availability to life-saving medications (Morten and Moss 2020, Kapczynski et al. 2012). Flexible IP frameworks that allow for compulsory licensing and other mechanisms during public health emergencies can help strike this balance, ensuring that the benefits of innovation reach all populations (Jung and Kwon 2015).

3. Clinical Trials: The Foundation of Medical Innovation

Clinical trials are the cornerstone of modern medical innovation, serving as an essential component in the creation of new medications and healthcare technologies. They are generally divided into four phases, each crucial to determining the safety, efficacy, and optimal use of a new treatment (Jungand Kwon 2015).

- **Phase I:** This stage generally includes a small cohort of healthy individuals or patients and aims to evaluate the safety profile of a medication. Researchers evaluate how the drug interacts with the body, its pharmacokinetics, and the appropriate dosage range (Royle2017).
- **Phase II:** During this phase, the medication is tested on a larger group of patients, usually those who have the illness or condition that the medication aims to address. The primary focus is on efficacy, while safety continues to be monitored.

- **Phase III:** The most extensive and expensive phase, involving hundreds to thousands of patients, seeks to validate the drug's efficacy, track side effects, and evaluate it with standard or placebo treatments. This phase is critical for securing regulatory approval from agencies like the FDA (Jung and Kwon 2015).
- **Phase IV:** Often referred to as post-marketing surveillance, this phase occurs after a drug has been approved for public use. It involves long-term studies to track the drug's performance in a broader population and ensures that no unexpected adverse effects arise (Royle 2017).

Clinical trials are essential for translating laboratory research into real-world patient benefits, forming a rigorous process that underpins modern healthcare innovation (Jung and Kwon 2015). The financial and temporal demands of clinical trials represent significant barriers to drug development. On average, bringing a new drug to market costs approximately $1-2 billion and takes 10-15 years (Light and Lexchin 2012). Several factors contribute to these costs:

- Pre-clinical research costs: Before even reaching clinical trials, extensive laboratory and animal testing must be conducted to assess a drug's basic safety profile.
- Clinical trial phases: As trials progress through each phase, costs multiply due to increasing patient enrollment, longer monitoring periods, and the complexity of data collection (Jung and Kwon 2015).
- Regulatory requirements: Meeting the stringent requirements set by regulatory bodies like the FDA and EMA adds both time and cost, particularly during Phase III, when large-scale trials are conducted (Royle 2017).
- Failure rate: A major factor driving up costs is the high failure rate of clinical trials. Approximately 90% of drugs that enter clinical trials do not make it to market, leading to enormous financial losses for pharmaceutical companies (Jung and Kwon 2015, Light and Lexchin 2012).

As a result, intellectual property rights play a critical role in allowing companies to recover these substantial investments (Kapczynski et al. 2012). The exclusivity provided by patents and data protection ensures that innovators have a limited window in which to reap financial returns before generics can enter the market (Light and Lexchin 2012). IP rights significantly influence the design, conduct, and outcomes of clinical trials, both by incentivizing investment and by shaping data-sharing practices.

- **Incentivizing investment:** Strong IP protections, such as patents and data exclusivity, encourage pharmaceutical companies and investors to fund clinical trials. Without the guarantee of market exclusivity, companies would be reluctant to allocate billions toward the development of new medications (Kapczynski et al. 2012).
- **Design considerations:** IP can also affect how clinical trials are designed. Companies may prioritize trial designs that maximize the marketability of a drug, potentially leading to selective reporting of positive results or the exclusion of certain patient demographics to ensure better outcomes. This can raise ethical questions about the objectivity of trials (Jung and Kwon 2015).
- **Data sharing and access to trial results:** While IP protections are essential for recouping investments, they can also limit access to trial results. Companies may be hesitant to share data that could benefit competitors, especially during the patent period. On the other hand, there has been increasing advocacy for greater transparency and data-sharing to improve patient outcomes and foster collaboration across the scientific community (Royle 2017).

In certain instances, data exclusivity regulations hinder competitors from utilizing the original trial data to secure approval for generic versions, even after the patent expires. This can delay the availability of cheaper, generic alternatives, potentially restricting access to life-saving treatments (Hubbard and Love 2004). Balancing these concerns is critical for ensuring that IP laws serve both the concern of creators and the public.

4. The intersection of IP and access to health care

Intellectual property (IP) laws, especially patents, are intended to promote innovation by providing creators with exclusive privileges to their inventions for a specified duration. In the pharmaceutical sector, these protections enable companies to recover their substantial investments in research and development (R&D). However, IP can also pose obstacles to accessing essential medications, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) where affordability is a key concern. Patents on life-saving drugs, such as those for HIV/AIDS and cancer, can result in monopolies that lead to elevated drug prices that are out of reach for many (Ford et al. 2004). Pharmaceutical companies justify these high prices as necessary to cover R&D costs, which can amount to billions of dollars per drug. However, this rationale often comes at the cost of limiting access to critical treatments for vulnerable populations (Reichman 2009).

There exists an inherent conflict between promoting innovation and ensuring broad access to medications. On one side, pharmaceutical companies contended that without intellectual property protection, there would be minimal motivation to invest in costly and high-risk research and development projects. On the other hand, critics point out that the exclusivity granted by patents often leads to inflated prices that are unaffordable for most people in LMICs (Outterson 2009). Balancing these two priorities—rewarding innovation while ensuring that life-saving drugs are affordable—remains a significant challenge in global health policy.

One possible solution to this challenge is the implementation of obligatory licensing, which enables governments to permit the production of generic versions of patented medications during public health emergencies. While this approach is legal under international agreements like the TRIPS Agreement, it has been met with resistance from pharmaceutical companies and some high-income countries (Abbott 2002).

The global implications of IP laws on healthcare access are particularly pronounced in LMICs, where access to essential medicines remains a critical challenge. International trade agreements and the global nature of pharmaceutical patents often com-

plicate this issue. In LMICs, patents on essential medicines can create monopolies that lead to exorbitant prices, preventing the most vulnerable populations from accessing life-saving treatments (Ford et al. 2004). For example, antiretroviral drugs used to treat HIV/AIDS were prohibitively expensive in many LMICs until international pressure led to the creation of generic versions (Baker 2008). The same dynamic applies to novel therapies for conditions like hepatitis C and cancer, where patent monopolies often restrict access.

The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), created by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, establishes international benchmarks for intellectual property protection, including pharmaceutical patents. While TRIPS mandates that all member countries implement minimum IP standards, it also provides certain flexibilities, such as compulsory licensing and parallel importation, which nations can utilize to enhance access to essential medications (Correa 2000). The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health (2001) reaffirmed these flexibilities, highlighting that intellectual property protection should not obstruct countries from adopting measures to safeguard public health (Abbott 2002). It clarifies that TRIPS should be interpreted and applied in a way that supports the rights of WTO members to protect public health and enhance access to medicines for everyone.

While Doha Declaration represented a pivotal advancement forward in terms of global health equity, many countries still face pressure from high-income nations and multinational pharmaceutical companies to refrain from using these flexibilities (Sell 2003). This has led to debates over whether TRIPS and related trade agreements serve public health interests or primarily benefit large corporations (Baker 2008). Several real-world examples illustrate the complex relationship between IP rights and availability to healthcare. In some cases, IP has facilitated innovation, while in others, it has hindered availability to indispensable medication.

- **HIV Crisis in South Africa**

During 1990s, South Africa faced a massive HIV crisis, with millions of people in need of antiretroviral (ARV) therapy. However, the high cost of patented ARV drugs made them inaccessible to the majority of the population. In response, the South African government passed legislation to allow the manufacture of generic alternatives to these medications, invoking the compulsory licensing provisions allowed under TRIPS. This move was met with fierce opposition from pharmaceutical companies, but international pressure eventually led to the availability of affordable generics, saving countless lives (Ford et al. 2004).

- **Hepatitis C treatments**

More recently, the introduction of direct-acting antivirals (DAAs) for hepatitis C treatment has ignited comparable discussions. The steep prices of these medications, influenced by patent protections, have restricted access in numerous low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In response, several nations have granted obligatory licenses for the manufacture or importation of generic alternatives of these drugs, much to the frustration of pharmaceutical companies (Reichman 2009).This case highlights the ongoing tension between rewarding innovation and ensuring access to life-saving treatments.

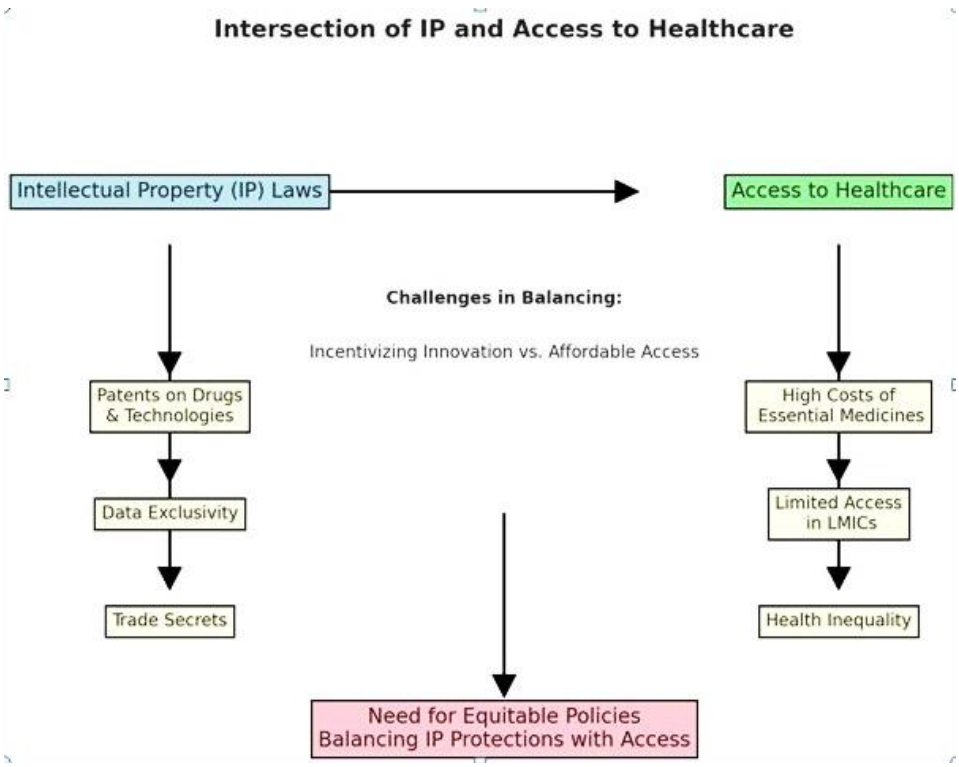

Figure 1. A simplified flow sheet illustrating the convergence of Intellectual Property (IP) laws and access to healthcare. The diagram highlights key challenges in balancing the need to incentivize innovation through IP protection while ensuring affordable access to vital medications, par-

ticularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The flow sheet underscores the necessity for equitable policies that address health inequality.

- **COVID-19 vaccine patents**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought renewed attention to the matter of IP and availability to medicines, particularly in the context of vaccine distribution. While high-income countries were able to secure early access to COVID-19 vaccines, many LMICs struggled to obtain sufficient doses due to patent protections and supply chain limitations. Requests for a temporary exemption from TRIPS provisions for COVID-19-related technologies were met with opposition from pharmaceutical firms and certain high-income nations, although the issue remains under negotiation (Hoen 2021). These case studies underscore the ongoing challenge of balancing IP protection with the necessity of guaranteeing availability to essential medication, particularly in LMICs.

5. Potential solutions and Policy Proposals

Current IP systems, particularly patents, create monopolies that often result in high drug prices, restricting access to vital medications, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). To address this, several alternative incentive models have been proposed, which aim to encourage pharmaceutical innovation while improving affordability and access.

Prize funds are a proposed model where innovators are rewarded with a financial prize rather than exclusive patent rights (Love 2007). Instead of granting monopolies, governments or international organizations could establish prize funds to encourage the creation of new medications. For example, a prize could be offered for developing treatments for diseases like tuberculosis or malaria, which disproportionately affect LMICs but are often neglected due to limited market potential. This model separates the rate of R&D from the cost of the medicine, allowing for affordable distribution once the drug is developed (Outterson 2009).

Patent pools involve pooling patents from multiple stakeholders, such as pharmaceutical companies, governments, or research institutions, and making them accessible to third parties under specific conditions (Ford et al. 2004). This allows for greater collaboration in R&D and can lead to more affordable pricing for medicines. One instance is the Medicines Patent Pool (MPP), which was created to enhance access to HIV medications in low- and middle-income countries by motivating patent holders to license their technologies to generic manufacturers (Baker 2008). The success of the MPP has spurred interest in expanding this model to other diseases like hepatitis C and COVID-19.

Open-access models promote the sharing of research data and findings without patent restrictions, fostering greater collaboration in the development of new drugs (Hoen 2021). This approach has gained traction, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as researchers and governments have pushed for more transparent sharing of vaccine research and technology. Initiatives like the Open COVID Pledge, which encouraged companies to make their IP freely available during the pandemic, highlight the potential of this model to accelerate innovation while ensuring public access to life-saving treatments.

Balancing the protection of intellectual property with the need for affordable medicines requires targeted policy interventions. The following are key recommendations for achieving this balance:

- **Shortening patent exclusivity periods**

One proposal is to reduce the length of patent exclusivity for life-saving medicines. This would allow for faster the entry of generic medications into the market, thus reducing prices and increasing access (Reichman 2009). Shortened exclusivity could be applied selectively to drugs deemed essential by public health agencies, ensuring that critical medicines are made affordable more quickly.

- **Encouraging voluntary licensing**

Voluntary licensing agreements, where patent holders allow generic manufacturers to produce their drugs in exchange for royalties, can help reduce drug prices while maintaining financial incentive for innovators (Outterson 2009). Governments and international organizations can encourage pharmaceutical companies to enter into voluntary licensing arrangements, particularly for medicines that are crucial to public health. This approach has been successful with HIV medicines, and there is potential to expand its use to other treatments.

- **Expanding the use of compulsory licensing**

Compulsory licensing enables governments to permit the production of generic versions of patented medications without the patent holder's consent during public health emergencies (Abbott 2002). While this flexibility is allowed under the TRIPS Agreement, a number of states face political and economic pressure from high-income nations and pharmaceutical companies to refrain from using compulsory licenses. Strengthening international support for this mechanism, particularly through organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), could enhance its application to enhance access to essential medications in low- and middle-income countries (Correa 2000).

- **Tiered pricing models**

Tiered or differential pricing refers to establishing varying prices for the same medication according to a country's income level or the financial capacity of its population (Baker 2008). High-income countries would pay higher prices for patented medicines, while LMICs would be offered lower prices. This model allows pharmaceutical companies to recoup their R&D costs while making essential medicines more affordable for populations in need. Numerous international organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO), have advocated for the wider adoption of tiered pricing to address healthcare inequities.

5.1. The Role of Governments and International Organizations

Governments and international organizations play a crucial role in shaping regulatory frameworks that ensure both innovation and access to medicines. Several key mechanisms can be employed to achieve these objectives:

- **Regulatory frameworks for IP management**

Governments can implement regulatory frameworks that balance the interests of innovators with public health needs. For example, the use of patent linkage, which ties the approval of generic drugs to the expiration of patents, can be adjusted to accelerate the availability of generic versions of essential medications (Ford et al. 2004). Additionally, policymakers can create legal pathways for the early introduction of generics in situations where public health is threatened, thus ensuring timely access to life-saving treatments.

- **Responsibility of international organizations**

Organizations such as the WTO, WHO, and World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) have a central role in facilitating global discussions on IP and healthcare access. The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health emphasized the need to interpret IP rules in ways that support public health objectives (Abbott 2002). By strengthening global cooperation and ensuring that IP laws are designed with flexibility to accommodate public health needs, these organizations can help ensure that IP protections should not undermine access to essential medications.

- **Encouraging innovation for neglected diseases**

Neglected diseases, which primarily affect populations in LMICs, often receive insufficient attention from pharmaceutical companies due to limited market incentives. Governments and international organizations can help fill this gap by funding R&D for neglected diseases or offering tax incentives and subsidies to encourage private-sector investment (Baker 2008). Public-private collaborations like the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi), are examples of successful collaborations that aim to develop treatments for diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and Chagas disease, which would otherwise be neglected by traditional market-driven approaches.

6. Conclusions

The interplay between IP rights and healthcare access requires a careful balance between incentivizing pharmaceutical innovation and ensuring the affordability of essential medicines. While IP laws are critical for promoting R&D, they can also lead to high drug prices, limiting access, particularly in LMICs. Alternative models, such as prize funds and patent pools, offer promising solutions, allowing for innovation without excessive costs to patients. Policymakers must explore flexible mechanisms such as voluntary licensing and compulsory licensing to address these inequities. International organizations like the WTO, WHO, and WIPO play a vital role in supporting regulatory frameworks that balance innovation and access. Ultimately, fostering greater collaboration among stakeholders and implementing equitable policies can ensure that new medical innovations benefit all populations, not just those in high-income countries. Balancing innovation with affordability is a key to achieve global health equity.

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