

International Association for Business and Health (IABH)
Ann Sullivan

The International Association for Business and Health is a nonprofit advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., and was formed to advance the combined interests of business with the need for quality health care. The Association's President Ann Sullivan, well known in America for her work on business and women's issues, spearheaded this initiative together with a distinguished group of advisers and board members from both the business and health care communities. The Association is concerned about the future of that relationship, concerned that the lives of generations of people worldwide will be needlessly lost as a direct result of health care policies adopted by the World Health Organization today.

Foremost among the threats to the future of health care is the various efforts to curtail or even eliminate patent rights. Seizing drug formulas to reproduce at-will may seem like a tempting short cut to some policy makers and advocates. Unfortunately for the desperately impoverished peoples of the world, many policy makers – even within the health care community itself - lack understanding about how patent rights impact patients.

Entrepreneurs are not the adversaries of people in need. In fact, entrepreneurs are a crucial prerequisite in advancing the quality and availability of health care to people worldwide. Property right protection is the key to protecting the fruits of a person's labor, sparks the incentive to innovate, and produces a healthy, prosperous community. In short, property rights form the very foundation of a civil society. It is a principle that has real-world implications for entrepreneurs - people who own brick-and-mortar shops and creators of intellectual property – as well as for consumers worldwide. In the modern worldwide economy, intellectual property is, arguably, even more important to businesses and consumers than physical property. Consider the fact that intellectual capital is the most important asset of many of the world's largest and most powerful companies.

Under the current patent system, companies engaged in pharmaceutical research and manufacturing have produced medicines to treat a wide variety of illnesses, from diabetes to AIDS to cancer. That is no abstract theory about how to save human lives – it is happening now, in the real world. But before the first tablet or injection is given to a patient waiting for relief, an average of \$800 million has been spent in research and development, according to a 2003 study published in *The Journal of Health Economics*, to make certain that the compound will do its job and do it safely and effectively. Such investment spurs an economy but even more importantly, the development of new medicines changes lives. A healthy populace is one that can attend school, work, and become the teachers, business leaders, and government officials that advance nations. But unless hard work is rewarded, innovation protected, and health care systems (as well as business and agriculture) allowed to flourish, economic development languishes, education falters, and public health inevitably is placed at risk. It is easy to see that intellectual property rights tie patient to corporation, researcher to physician and all to the economy. A business grows, a worker once again can work, a family prospers, and the economy advances. Clearly, property rights are directly tied to the growth and prosperity of business within developing and developed nations. A robust economy both supports and is supported by worker access to health care delivery and access.

The WHO can play a pivotal role in helping the peoples of the world have better, more affordable access to life-saving drugs. There are activists who call for a Robin Hood approach: simply seize drug formulas and reproduce them to help the needy. Surely this cannot be a viable, long-term strategy for meeting health care needs. Even in instances drugs have been donated, the health care infrastructure of Third World countries lack the resources and infrastructure to distribute drugs and monitor treatment. For AIDS drugs, for example, taking and monitoring the combined drug therapies for the disease is equivalent to a full-time job, even with close physician

supervision. In reality, it is problems associated poverty and poor governance – not drug patents – that cause hundreds of millions of needless deaths in the Third World.

It is imperative for the WHO to take a strong stand now in support of rights associated with intellectual property, in this case the arduous research and development process associated with bringing new prescription drugs to the marketplace. As the WHO considers a global strategy and plan of action, it should give strong weight to the market system that has produced the life-saving drugs that so many people depend upon. We believe circumventing the patent system is a short sighted approach. What is needed is a strong business community that will produce long term, lasting improvements to the health care system in countries that have been waiting for this to happen.