



Book review

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Ten stories that mattered in access to medicines in 2011

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Access to medicines remains a major problem for people living in developing nations. A variety of factors, such as medicines not being available or licensed for distribution in a particular country, logistic difficulties and difficult terrain, limit access but the high cost of medicines is becoming an important factor restricting access in poor nations.

Increasing emphasis on patents and intellectual property rights (IPR) by giant pharmaceutical corporations and governments in developed nations is creating problems in accessing medicines for poor people in developing nations according to this booklet published recently by, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, www.msf.org). In 2001 world governments signed the Doha Declaration emphasising health over trade and access to affordable medicines over IPR. Ten years down the line problems remain in implementation of the agreement. In 2001 the Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria was created. The fund has done remarkable work in combating these diseases but is facing funding problems.

In this booklet MSF briefly describe 10 stories that in the year 2011 had either a positive or a negative impact on access to medicines in developing countries. The first story deals with more affordable treatments for HIV/AIDS which can not only treat patients suffering from the disease but can also reduce transmission to others by up to 96% acting as effective prevention. Financial commitment is required to translate the hope offered by scientific advances into reality. Prices of the same drug manufactured by different companies vary in many cases often up to 200%. Information about medicine prices is not easily accessible and the initiative by UNICEF to make public the price it pays for all vaccines it buys is a step in the right direction. Governments and organisations are often not able to negotiate competitive prices for medicines translating into higher prices for consumers.

The third story is about the Global Fund set up to fight the big three diseases (HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria) facing problems in

funding putting the progress being made in the last decade at risk. Drug resistant tuberculosis (DR-TB) has infected around five million people in the last 10 years. A new diagnostic test can diagnose DR-TB in less than two hours. The test is expensive but can improve diagnosis and treatment of DR-TB. India is a major producer of cheap, generic medicines but developed nations and pharmaceutical companies are putting increasing pressure on India to accept tougher IPR laws threatening medicine access in developing nations. This is the focus of story number five.

The malarial parasite is becoming resistant to traditional medicines and artemisinin-based therapies are becoming important. These therapies are expensive and the Affordable Medicines Facility-malaria (AMFm) was launched in Africa to enhance access to newer antimalarials. The initiative has also produced a new set of problems mentioned in the booklet. Shortages of drugs used to treat Chaga's disease in Latin America and increased prices for medicines in middle income countries are covered.

Malnutrition among children may be common in South Asia and Africa. Famines grab media attention but the 'silent' cases rarely come into the spotlight. Providing nutrient-dense food to malnourished children is an important public health initiative. The last story in the series mentions treatment guidelines being released for cryptococcal meningitis, a major opportunistic infection in AIDS patients. However, the two drugs used: amphotericin B and flucytosine are difficult to access for patients in developing nations.

The report has been well produced and the patient photographs and brief descriptions lend a powerful human interest element. Brief quotes by persons involved in access to medicines highlight the issues involved. The language is simple and each story has been briefly covered on one page with a photograph and a small quote. The booklet will be of interest to all those interested in promoting access to medicines in developing nations. Educated laymen interested in issues concerning health and medicines will also find the publication of interest.



About the booklet:

Médecins Sans Frontières: Ten stories that mattered in access to medicines in 2011. MSF Access Campaign, Switzerland, 2011. The booklet can be downloaded for free from <http://www.msfacecess.org/10stories2011> where you can read the stories in HTML format. The PDF version can be downloaded from: [http://www.msfacecess.org/sites/default/files/MSF_assets/CA ME/TopTen/Access_Report_10Stories_ENG_2011.pdf](http://www.msfacecess.org/sites/default/files/MSF_assets/CA%20ME/TopTen/Access_Report_10Stories_ENG_2011.pdf).