



September 6th, 2004.

Re: Ministerial Summit on Health Research: Bridging the Know-Do Divide to Achieve the MDGs, Mexico City, November 16th-20th 2004.

Dear Sir/Madam,

As you know, the Ministerial Summit on Health Research will take place in Mexico on November 16th-20th 2004. The theme of the summit is Bridging the Know-Do Divide to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) believes that this summit offers a unique opportunity to re-examine the ways in which priorities in medicines research and development are set and the ways in which such R&D is financed.

The MDGs set ambitious targets for health, including:

- Reducing child mortality;
- Improving maternal health; and
- Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other neglected diseases.

MSF is concerned that these goals will not be met using the tools presently at the disposal of health workers. However, health research and development to address the needs of people in developing countries has almost come to a standstill.

Urgent action is needed to ensure that new essential medicines, vaccines and diagnostics are developed and become available at prices affordable to people in developing countries.

Medicines research and development is almost exclusively confined to the private sector, and is driven by prospects for profitable returns rather than public health needs. Ninety per cent of all biomedical research and 60% of all the profits from pharmaceutical drugs are in the USA, while Africa represents only 1% of drug sales worldwide. As a result of this imbalance, in the last 25 years almost 1400 new medicines have been developed of which only 1% were for tropical diseases – diseases that kill hundreds of thousands of people every year, but which mainly affect people in the developing world.¹

¹ Trouiller P, Olliaro P, Torreele E, Orbinski J, Laing R, Ford N. Drug development for neglected diseases: a deficient market and a public-health policy failure. *Lancet* 22 June 2002 359;9324: 2188-2194.

Among the examples of gaps in research and development into neglected diseases are:

- Despite **tuberculosis** killing 2 million people each year and being on the rise, existing drugs and diagnostics are antiquated and are not being replaced:
 - The fundamental **diagnostic** test for active tuberculosis (sputum smear microscopy for acid-fast bacilli) was developed in 1882. It fails to detect 40-55% of those who have active TB and is unable to detect TB in most HIV/TB co-infected patients and children.
 - The bulk of the **drugs** presently used against TB were developed before the 1950s, and patients must spend 6-8 months under treatment.
- Despite 95% of the 38 million people with **HIV/AIDS** coming from low and middle income countries, the research and development agenda for HIV/AIDS is concentrated on meeting the needs in high income countries, causing major gaps in developing appropriate tools to combat the epidemic, including:
 - There is a lack of appropriate formulations of antiretroviral medicines for the 2.5 million **children** with HIV, and the formulations which do exist are costly and difficult to administer.
 - There seems to be no identifiable progress, and even less commitment, towards finding a therapeutic **vaccine** which can cure AIDS.
- Despite **sleeping sickness** infecting 300,000 Africans each year, and killing 60,000 of them, the fatal disease barely registers on the world's health R&D agenda:
 - Sleeping sickness **drugs** are toxic or poorly adapted to resource-poor settings: melarsoprol is arsenic-based and kills one in 20 patients treated with it; eflornithine is complex to administer, requiring slow drug infusions every six hours for 14 days.

MSF believes that the Mexico Ministerial Summit can start to change the way priorities for essential health R&D are set and the way this R&D is financed. In doing so, it could help ensure access of even the poorest patients to the fruits of innovation and promote health R&D as a global public good.

We ask you to ensure that these important matters are at the heart of the discussions at the Summit.

Yours sincerely,

Ellen 't Hoen,
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Campaign for Access to Essential Medicines,
Médecins Sans Frontières.