GSK tops ranking for making drugs available to poor people

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The BMJ

GSK, Novartis, Johnson and Johnson, and Merck KGaA have retained their 2016 positions as the leading drug companies in terms of making their products available to patients in low and middle income countries, an independent ranking shows.

The Access to Medicines (AtM) Index, published every two years, ranks 20 of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies according to their work in this area.

The bottom five companies are named as Bayer, Abbvie, Daiichi Sankyo, Astellas, and Eli Lilly. Of these five, only Bayer and Eli Lilly have strategies in place for improving access to drugs.

The index found that five companies were carrying out 63% of the most urgently needed research and development projects: GSK, Johnson and Johnson, Merck KGaA, Novartis, and Sanofi.

The index has identified 45 diseases, conditions, and pathogens that need what it calls “priority” R&D. A quarter of the R&D pipeline projects analysed by the index (298 of 1314 projects) had a priority focus, and 144 of these targeted malaria, HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, Chagas disease, and leishmaniasis. But many diseases were overlooked, including several haemorrhagic fevers, several parasitic worm diseases, syphilis, Buruli ulcer, cholera, and diarrhoea caused by E coli.

In AtM initiatives companies can use a combination of pricing, donation programmes, and licensing agreements to get on-patent products to the patients who need them.

The Access to Medicine Foundation publishes the index and is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the UK and Dutch governments. The goal is to create an incentive to expand access initiatives and to encourage transparent reporting.

But the index has been criticised for simply looking at what projects are being undertaken and how they are improving access, not what the outcomes are.

Many of the AtM initiatives are too limited in scope, the report accompanying the index said. The index identified 53 products that are critical candidates for companies’ access initiatives.

These products have all been designated as an essential medicine by the World Health Organisation and are mainly vaccines, and treatments for HIV and AIDS and hepatitis C. Of these 53 products, 37 are covered by at least one AtM initiative. But most initiatives are limited and apply in fewer than five countries where affordability is a problem.

The report also found that although more than half of deaths from cancer now occur in low to middle income countries, only 14 of the 20 leading drug companies have initiatives to increase access to oncology drugs in these countries. The initiatives of those that do have limited reach and target fewer than five key countries on average.

The report “strongly urged” companies to plan ahead during the clinical development of new oncology drugs “to ensure successful products can be made more widely available more quickly in low-and-middle-income countries.”

Dimitri Eynikel, of MSF’s access campaign, said, “It is important that the index highlights that only five of the 20 leading pharmaceutical companies have really invested in the priority health needs of developing countries. This is a very low number. And if you look at the five companies, they are investing in a number of disease areas—including tuberculosis, malaria, and Chagas disease—that also attract high levels of public funding. So there are financial incentives to work in these areas. This means a lot of areas remain neglected, such as snakebite, which disables more people than landmines each year, and where there is a shortage of antivenoms.”

Eynikel said it was interesting to see Johnson and Johnson ranked third in the index. “Johnson and Johnson has received lucrative incentives for its TB product bedaquiline, such as orphan drug designation that gives the company a 50% tax credit, which reduces R&D costs,” he said. “MSF has repeatedly asked the company to cut the price in half—for example, by licensing to the Medicines Patent Pool and allowing generic companies to enter the market in some countries. But it has refused. Bedaquiline is not licensed for use in 18 of the countries with a high burden of TB. So although this index is welcome, it needs to look not just at the policies but also at the outcomes.”

1 Access to medicine index. https://accesstomedicinefoundation.org/access-to-medicine-index.
**Figure**

Fig 1 Ranking of 20 drug companies by numbers of priority R&D projects