

Pharma not doing enough to improve medicines access, report finds

Industry avoids clinical trials in lower-income countries, while rarely transferring tech to local partners, the research found.



The report looked at how many actions and progress the 20 largest research-based pharmaceutical companies made in the last couple of years on access to medicine. | Elsa Biyick/Hans Lucas/AFP via Getty Images

by [Giedre Peseckyte](#) • NOV 19 • 4 MINUTES READ

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Pharmaceutical companies must accelerate efforts to ensure their medicines reach populations in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs), according to a new report by the non-profit Access to Medicine Foundation.

Drugmakers continue to largely swerve lower-income countries for carrying out clinical trials while there were even fewer technology transfers in 2024 than in 2022 to partners in lower-income countries to boost medicines manufacturing and access in those regions, the report found.

“If we’re really going to solve health equity and really be serious about broadening access, then industry has to step up the game,” said Jayasree Iyer, head of the Access to Medicine Foundation whose report, [the 2024 Access to Medicine Index](#), published on Tuesday.

She said that while there are “a lot of good things and progress made” by individual companies, the potential for expanding access remains unrealized. “The pace at which we expect the progress to be at is not where it needs to be,” Iyer told POLITICO.

While more and more companies are adopting “inclusive business models” — aimed at making medicines accessible and affordable to underserved populations — the outcomes of these models are mixed. Transparent reporting on how many patients are truly being reached is also lacking, the report found.

“There’s very little data and very little tracking,” Iyer said, adding that it leaves unanswered questions regarding the next steps companies are going to take to reach

different population groups or the hurdles that they're looking to solve.

No trials, no access

One issue is the “worryingly low” representation of resource-poor populations in clinical trials. Just 43 percent of trials occur across 113 LMICs covered by the analysis and the disparity is even more pronounced in low-income countries, where just 3.5 percent of trials occur.

“We already know from companies who've been very clear saying ... we register our products in the countries where the trials are,” Iyer said, making other countries wait or not giving access to the medicine at all. While broadening the inclusivity of clinical trials to ensure genetically diverse populations is important, the incentive for a company that would have to cover all the costs “is actually very low.”

But it shouldn't just come down to costs, Iyer argued.

“Companies will have to take the ownership if they're serious about health equity and ... want to be known, and want to attract talent in their own companies and be an impactful industry in that sense,” Iyer said. “You can't sit back and just wait on that.”

Another area that companies should improve on is voluntary licensing agreements, which together with technology transfers is a way to improve long-term and sustainable access, the report states. Since the foundation's 2022 Index report, there has been a noticeable slowdown in licensing activities, now reverting to levels seen before the Covid-19 pandemic. Only two new non-exclusive voluntary licensing-agreements were identified during the period of analysis for the 2024 Index (with a third following), compared with six in the [2022 Index](#).

Companies pursuing technology transfers are concentrating their initiatives in upper middle-income markets. Only six companies — Boehringer Ingelheim, Gilead, Merck KGaA, Novo Nordisk, Pfizer and Sanofi — report having established technology transfer initiatives in the sub-Saharan Africa (except for South Africa) region.

“The opportunity to work more on voluntary licenses, do more technology transfer agreements and broaden their access, is actually quite big, and we want to highlight that and quantify it,” Iyer said.

The report looked at how many actions and progress the 20 largest research-based pharmaceutical companies made in the last couple of years on access to medicine, based on three areas: governance of access, research and development and product delivery.

Novartis ranks as the top company for the first time, followed closely by GSK. Sanofi, Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, ranked third to fifth respectively. Eli Lilly & Co and AbbVie Inc scored the lowest across the 20 companies assessed.

Novartis is “honored” to be ranked first, a spokesperson said, adding: “While encouraged by reaching 284 million patients in 2023, we remain focused on expanding access to medicines and strengthening healthcare delivery in underserved communities.”

David Reddy, head of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations, said the report highlighted “important industry progress.” “To achieve sustainable impact, stronger collaboration among companies, governments, and global health stakeholders remains essential,” he added.

lyer believes that there are enough tools out there to broaden access globally. “It can be done,” she said.

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