WTO Relaxes Rule on Drug Patents

Developing countries have won a breakthrough deal on relaxing drug patents at the World Trade Organization (WTO) Doha meeting recently. Campaigners hope that the new agreement will bring down the cost of remedies for treating diseases that are killing millions of poor people every year.

Under the agreement, countries can seek a waiver on public health grounds from strict WTO rules which guarantee drug patents for 20 years. The deal has still to be endorsed by the full WTO membership, but official sources are confident it would get through.

The row over patents has pitted the developing world against rich countries, threatening to derail the meeting aimed at launching a new round of global free trade talks. The US and Switzerland have backed a weaker deal, which would have allowed countries to buy cheap copies of patented drugs only when they face a health emergency.

But campaigners said that the US has undermined its own position by itself threatening to override the patent on Cipro, the main anti-anthrax remedy, even though only four people have died of the disease.

New Law to Curb Occupational Diseases in China

Tens of thousands of Chinese workers are plagued by deadly illnesses like silicosis, chemical poisoning and leukemia each year due to exposure to hazards at their workplaces. Aiming to stop such health damage and death, China’s health authority is slated to put into effort a national law on prevention and control of occupational diseases next year.

Workers will be able to seek legal aid if their rights to work under protection in a dangerous environment is violated by employers.

Rapid industrialization in the past two decades has given rise to nearly eight million industrial enterprises, more than 20 million township businesses and some 60 000 firms operated by overseas businessmen. Although a disease-control network in large- and medium-sized enterprises has been operating for years, many township and foreign-funded enterprises have been found to be failing to keep employees away from occupational hazards.

According to an MOH survey conducted in half of the Chinese provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities, workshops at 83 percent of township enterprises were found to be hazardous to health, and 60 percent of them had barely adopted preventive measures.

Mr. Zhou Anshou, director of the Research Institute of Labor Safety and Occupational Diseases, which is under the Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicines, said that workers in industries such as coal production, metallurgy, building materials, nonferrous metal, machinery and chemicals face especially high risks of suffering occupational illnesses.

The situation of some enterprises located in under-developed and rural areas is even worse off, as these regions are still using outdated technology and facilities which could lead to health problems.

Mr. Zhou is critical of some foreign companies
whose plants in China are using hazardous technology and facilities that are banned in their own countries. He said that with the increase in foreign-funded enterprises, there are thousands of poisoning cases and hundreds of death reported every year, and some poisonous materials are rarely found in China before. The number of poisoning cases occurring in foreign-funded enterprises rose by 44 percent last year from that of 1999.

Since many occupational diseases are preventable, the law has stipulated that facilities for prevention of work hazards should be adopted when the enterprise first starts to design and construct its plants.

The law also formulates employers’ obligations of preventing occupational illnesses and protecting workers’ interests.

Mr. Zhou pointed out that without the law and access to information about prevention, workers are neither aware of potential work hazards nor able to obtain compensation after falling ill. Offenders could face fines of as much as RMB50 000 (US$60 386) and closure of their enterprises, compared with fines of only several thousand Chinese yuan previously.

Tighter Food Safety Controls Urged in China

China’s Ministry of Health is determined to strengthen the administration of food safety based on the Law on Food Hygiene, with the aim of eliminating food poisoning cases.

These efforts came amid a recent outbreak of poisoning cases. At least forty farmers suffered food poisoning recently in Jintan in east China’s Jiangsu province, and 484 people got sick by eating poisonous pork in Heyuan in Guangdong province. No deaths related to the cases have been reported.

Mr. Zhao Tonggang, a ministry official, said that unsafe use of pesticides and growth-enhancing hormones are the major causes of these food poisoning cases. Some farmers, tempted by profits, use banned pesticides, chemicals and hormones to increase production.

The growing number of food producers also contributes to the problem. From 1995 to 2000, the number of food producers increased from 1.2 million to 5 million. Many small-scale food producers use simple facilities and untrained staff. Facilities for food storage and production are rarely hygienic.

To address these problems, Dr. Zhang Wenkang, China’s health minister, has called for improvements in the inspection system, placing frequent checks on every part of the food production process, including planting, breeding, production, processing, storage, transportation and sale. The government will also educate food producers to strictly follow the Law on Food Hygiene and improve their professional ethics.

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Meanwhile, the supervisory role of consumers is also encouraged. Measures will be adopted to expand consumers’ access to food safety administration. Ms. Lisa A. Lee, an expert with the World Health Organization said that after all, it is the shared responsibility of the government, supervisory bodies and the consumers to ensure food safety.

Food-borne diseases remain prevalent in all parts of the world. In developed countries, it is estimated that up to one-third of the population experiences a food-borne illness each year. The US Center for Disease Control estimates that 76 million cases of food-borne illnesses lead to 325 000 hospitalizations and 5000 to 9000 deaths each year in the US. The cost of these diseases has been estimated to reach as much as US$7.5 million each year.

China Up Ante on War against HIV/AIDS

The Chinese government has vowed to do more in controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS and educating the public on protection against the deadly disease.

Dr. Zhang Wenkang, China’s minister of health, said at the First China AIDS/STD (sexually-transmitted diseases) Conference which drew 2000 participants nationwide, that the number of infected people, while still low compared with many other countries, is nevertheless increasing rapidly.

The number of infections in China reported in the first half of this year is 67.4...
percent higher than that of the same period last year. By the end of September this year, 28,133 people in China were confirmed to have contracted the HIV virus, of which 641 had died. But officials estimate that the actual number of HIV infections is substantially higher, numbering at least 600,000.

Dr. Zhang said that the HIV/AIDS situation in China is pressing. The virus is beginning to spread to all sectors of the population, not just high-risk people like drug users and homosexuals.

Dr. Peter Piot, executive director of the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS, said that the four-day conference is a historic event in China's fight against HIV/AIDS. He predicted that over the next two decades, what happens in China will determine the global burden of HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Zhang said that the Chinese government will invest more money over the next five years to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, including keeping donated blood contamination-free and teaching the public about disease prevention. Early diagnosis and treatment of the disease will also be improved.

Dr. Piot noted that China is already making headway in containing the problem. He said that people are now more willing to discuss HIV/AIDS than two years ago. Many beneficial projects are going on in communities around the country. Dr. Piot spoke highly of the use of celebrities as spokesmen for AIDS prevention.

Mr. Pu Cunxin, a well-known Chinese film star, was named the country's first AIDS prevention spokesman last year and has maintained a high-profile role in the fight against AIDS. At the opening ceremony of the conference, another three actors and singers were named as spokespersons for China's AIDS prevention campaign. Dr. Piot said that linking celebrities with a disease still considered shameful has helped to raise the public's awareness.

Dr. Dai Zhicheng, secretary-general of the conference, said that education on the disease is the best way to stop it from spreading. He said that since there is currently no way to eradicate the HIV virus, everyone in the country should receive education about it. Dr. Dai urged people to pay attention to AIDS and to take appropriate action. He also hoped that the conference will gather more public participation in fighting HIV/AIDS.

**Broader Mad Cow Test Urged in Japan**

Even with more stringent testing of cattle carcasses for mad cow disease in Japan, concerned parties said that many animals that died of illness or injury are being processed into meat and bone meal (MBM) — one source of transmitting bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) — without being tested. Outraged politicians are hence demanding for even more stringent testing.

Farmers and industry sources corroborating what they see as the lapse in testing some cattle carcasses said that the spinal cords, brains, eyes and other organs considered most likely sources of the deadly bovine disease are being turned into MBM without being separated first.

MBM has been banned for domestic use as animal feed. Since September, the government has moved to have stocks of the material disposed of in incinerators or mixed into concrete. Industry sources noted that nobody really wants the job of disposing of MBM.

Critics also said that all cattle carcasses should be tested before being disposed of, so as
to eliminate all possible sources of BSE contamination, especially because animals that have died of illness are most likely to have been infected.

Japan put into effect mandatory screening of all cattle intended for human consumption in October. About 60,000 beef carcasses have been tested since then.

But cattle farmers said that about 160,000 cattle die each year before they can be shipped to slaughter. And most are not tested for mad cow disease unless there are symptoms of such maladies.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries plans to begin applying mad cow testing to carcasses of about 4500 cattle that die annually after reaching the age of 24 months. But these measures will far from cover all the cattle that died before slaughter.

Cattle farmers and MBM producers said that most of the carcasses are processed into meal without extracting the risky parts because they do not have the proper eviscerating equipment. But since September, the spinal cords and other suspect organs from beef cattle have routinely been removed and burned.

Prof. Takashi Onodera of the University of Tokyo, a livestock expert and a member of a Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry’s panel of experts on mad cow disease, pointed out, “In France, for instance, dead cattle are more likely to be found to have mad cow disease than cattle shipped for human consumption. It is ideal to test all cattle carcasses.”

An official said, “As long as there is a way to dispose of dead cattle without testing, the truth about the disease will only remain hidden. We will not be able to break the chain of contamination.”

Research News

Thai Researcher Finds Safer and Cheaper Clot-busting Drug

A Thai researcher has developed a clot-busting drug that he says would be safer and cheaper than conventional heart medicines on the market. The German pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim agrees to develop the drug, which has been patented in 55 countries worldwide.

Dr. Chatchai Tayapiwatana of Thailand’s Chiang Mai University produced the drug from bacteria while doing doctoral research at Chiang Mai and Tubingen University in Germany under the Thailand Research Fund scholarship programme. He said that the drug is a recombinant protein from bacteria rK2S, which works as a thrombolytic agent.

With the help of bioreactor, the drug is much less expensive than thrombolytics produced from conventional mammalian host cells. He said that while bacterium-based drugs were not completely new, the main achievement of his work was the fact that the protein, fibrin fragment, is produced without the formation of inclusion bodies that required a costly renaturalisation process.

In addition, unlike many other thrombolytic agents, the drug carries no side effects. Common ones are systemic haemorrhaging and fibrinogen depletion.

According to Mr. Rolf Werner, corporate director of Boehringer Ingelheim, it would take another four years of development before the drug could be launched.

Once the work is completed, the product would be marketed under the name lektephase. Lek, which means small in Thai, represents the smallest molecule used in the production process. The research fund said that the work is a big breakthrough in heart medication, which would lead to lower drug prices.

Boehringer Ingelheim’s latest clotbuster, tenecteplase, was introduced in 1999.