

# Pharmaceutical companies sign contracts for vaccine sales to poorer countries to maximise profits

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24 June 2013

Pharmaceutical companies Merck and GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) have won the contract from the Global Alliance on Vaccines and Immunisations (GAVI) to sell their human papilloma virus (HPV) cancer vaccines to some of the world's poorest countries.

Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer in women worldwide, and 99 percent of cases are linked to the HPV genital infection. HPV can cause genital warts, but often has no symptoms. The vaccines, Cervarix and Gardasil, prevent infection types 1, 6, 16 and 18, which cause 70 percent of the world's cervical cancer.

The vaccine will be made available in Kenya, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Rwanda and Laos. Three vaccines have to be taken over a six-month period for an individual to be fully protected. It will be given to girls aged 9 to 13 years.

The contract runs until 2017, by which point it is hoped that 30 million children will have been vaccinated. Merck and GSK will initially sell 2.4 million doses of Gardasil and 180,000 doses of Cervarix to GAVI at a price of US\$4.50-US\$4.60 each. The average wage for a labourer working in Kenya is US\$1.37 to US\$2.00 a day. The three vaccinations work out as nearly US\$14.00 per child.

Katie Elder of the Doctors Without Borders/Medecins sans Frontieres charity criticised the deal, commenting, "It's really disappointing that pharmaceutical companies haven't offered GAVI a much better deal on the HPV vaccine. The price is unjustifiably high and will add to the already spiralling vaccination costs faced by low-income countries."

"It's appalling to see these companies seeking to

maximise their profits on the backs of developing countries by charging such a high price for this vital vaccine," she added. "It's a lost opportunity to negotiate for a truly low price."

Merck and GSK currently sell their cancer vaccines at US\$100 a dose in developed countries and last year recorded sales of US\$1.6 billion (Merck) and US\$416 million (GSK) for just this one vaccine.

There has been a slight dip in sales recently in developed countries, so pharmaceutical companies have been turning towards poorer countries to maximise their profits. To be able to effectively sell their products in these areas, they need to sell to charities like those that make up GAVI. This means that the donations that people are making to these charities are going straight into the pockets of Merck and GSK. The UNICEF charity will be carrying out the actual vaccination programme, so Merck and GSK won't even have to pay distribution costs.

GSK has previously been fined US\$3 billion for mispromoting two anti-depressant drugs in the United States between 1998 and 2003 and failing to report all necessary safety data to the US concerning its diabetes drug (Avandia) between 2001 and 2007. In 2009, it was criticised for selling a swine flu vaccine to the National Health Service in Britain at £6 a dose when it had only cost £1 to produce.

GSK chief executive Andrew Witty had declared that swine flu would be "a significant financial event for the company." The company reported a 10 percent rise in profits in the first three months after the virus was identified.

This begs the question of how much it cost both companies to produce the HPV vaccine. As cervical

cancer is not one of the biggest killers in the targeted regions, it suggests that the HPV vaccine must be very cheap to produce, compared to drugs that treat HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and diarrhoea.

Public health sectors are being slashed globally. It is worth noting that the Kenyan government has recently withdrawn government aid to all sectors of society to give the market free reign. The private sector is only interested in producing drugs and treatments that will see a good return in profits, with no regard for human needs.

Greece has been effectively boycotted by these companies, condemning many to a death sentence. Across the globe, millions are being pushed into poverty, which means that health care will become ever more the exclusive property of the wealthy.



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