

EDITORIAL COMMENT: Vaccines need to be affordable

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There is Big Money in Big Pharmaceuticals. Even those who lobby for the global multibillion dollar industry don't deny that. And, pandemic or no pandemic, there is going to be a lot of money made from Covid-19-related medicine, supplies and, if one were produced, a vaccine. One of the ways the giant medicine makers protect and prolong their revenue streams is by taking out patents on their formulae. But in this country, claim activists, that patent protection could spark a second coronavirus crisis as it would limit access to treatments and vaccines because it would price them out of the reach of both ordinary people and our health system. There is a lot of merit to that argument, particularly as genuine medicines on sale throughout the world continue to reap massive profits for their manufacturers ... windfalls way beyond what it cost to research and develop the drugs in the first place and beyond a fair return on investment. In countries like India, a thriving market in "generic medicines" has developed, because their patent legislation does not afford cast-iron protection to the original formulator. Even in this country, we are seeing generics playing a growing role in medicine, at a fraction of the cost of the originals. The downside of the generic approach and the effective denial of protection to intellectual property, is that it not only contravenes many international global trade treaties, but it can also give a country a reputation of being a "cowboy" state where global norms and legalities are ignored. These are the sort of countries investors shy away from. It is to be hoped, however, that a global health crisis of this nature might nudge governments into pressurising drug makers to provide treatments and vaccines at affordable costs. Making money should never be placed above the lives of human beings.