

New World Medicines Situation chapter on Access to Essential Medicines

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I am very pleased to announce the publication of a new World Medicines Situation chapter. It is on Access to Medicines as Part of the Right to Health and is written by Hans V. Hogerzeil formerly of the Department of Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policies, in WHO, Geneva, and Zafar Mirza from the Department of Public Health, Innovation and Intellectual Property in WHO, Geneva.

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Abstract

1. Human rights constitute an important principle of our time. These fundamental human rights translate the values of equity, freedom, fairness, social justice and non-discrimination into practical entitlements for individuals, which increasingly guide public policies and national judicial systems. Access to essential medicines as part of the right to health has been further refined in recent years;
2. An increasing number of patients in developing countries, especially in Central and South America, are claiming their health rights through the courts. However, instead of leaving it to the judiciary to define people's rights, health policy-makers should ensure that human rights principles are incorporated in medicine programmes from the outset;
3. The WHO World Health Assembly has agreed to use the legal recognition of the right to health as an indicator of a government's commitment to improving access to essential medicines. Access to essential medicines has also become one of five UN indicators to measure progress in the progressive realization of the right to health;
4. At least one third of the world's population has no regular access to medicines. Inequity in access to essential medicines is part of inequity in health care. Key evidence to document such inequities is rarely collected. More than 30 countries have not yet ratified the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and 60 countries do not recognize the right to health in their national constitution;

5. The concept of essential medicines with its focus on equity, solidarity and social justice is already very much in line with the principles of human rights. Yet the daily practice of national essential medicine policies and programmes can learn from the growing human rights movement and its emphasis on transparency, accountability and freedom from discrimination. This chapter sets out practical recommendations for governments, United Nations (UN) organizations and non- government organizations (NGOs) on ensuring access to essential medicines as part of the right to health.

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