Vaccines: A Case for Public Pharma

The Problem: Public Funds, Private Profit

Vaccines are critical to safeguarding public health as one of the most effective ways to prevent disease, including highly contagious diseases that can cause pandemics. But the for-profit pharmaceutical industry is neither prepared for nor incentivized to tackle growing public health challenges, like global pandemics.

How vaccine development works now:

1. The public pays for R&D. The majority of basic pharmaceutical R&D is already paid by the public. Vaccine development in particular is a long, expensive, and risky process with little potential for private gain, but huge public health pay-offs.

2. And then we give it away. Once the public has paid to develop a viable drug, the private sector gets the right to bring drugs “to market,” and can charge whatever it wants for the product—or decide not to market the medicine at all! So, the vaccines and other medications we need are often priced out of reach, or they aren’t available when we need them most.

The Solution: A Public Option

Public pharma is proven to work. Many vaccines—such as those for diphtheria, tetanus, polio, and measles—were often produced and distributed by the public sector in the past. To this day, public pharmaceutical companies operate in Sweden, Brazil, and Thailand, among many other countries.

It’s the government’s responsibility to ensure widespread access to safe and effective vaccines that are developed with our money. The U.S. government should develop and manufacture vaccines and other essential medicines so that we get the medicines we need, when we need them and at prices we can afford.

Our Demand: Public Option Now!

Case Study 1: The Ebola Vaccine

In early 2020, the FDA granted approval to the private pharma company Merck for an Ebola vaccine. However, recent research has shown that the Canadian government largely financed the development of the vaccine, and the private laboratory which bought the rights—and sold them to Merck for $50 million—actually hindered its development.

Case Study 2: COVID-19

The consumer advocacy group Public Citizen has demonstrated how the COVID-19 outbreak is just the most recent example of how private interests have corrupted vaccine development. Public sources have been funding clinical trials for years, but the lack of market incentives has meant that no private company has brought a vaccine to market.

When Jonas Salk—inventor of the polio vaccine—was asked who owned his patent, Salk replied: “Well, the people, I would say. There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?”