

Essential Action

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BRIEFING NOTE: WHO PUBLICATIONS POLICY PROPOSAL THREATENS TECHNICAL QUALITY OF INFORMATION PRODUCTS

The World Health Organization is currently considering a major overhaul of its publications policy.¹ There are serious problems with *some* of the proposed changes. If adopted, these changes may give commercial or ideological interests leverage to subvert the WHO's ability to issue evidence-based public health materials, contrary to the constitutional mandate of the Organization. They would also undermine the agency's flexibility, and interfere with regional and country offices' ability to respond quickly to local circumstances.

Recommendations

The proposed publications policy is on the agenda at the upcoming WHO Executive Board (EB) Meeting, which commences on Monday May 26 (Item 6.2 under Management, Budget and Financial Matters). The issue is not currently on the agenda of the World Health Assembly (WHA), which commences Monday May 19.

Essential Action recommends that WHO member countries ensure that the proposed publications policy is not approved by the Executive Board *until* the problematic sections are omitted.

Essential Action also recommends that member countries raise concerns about the publications policy during the World Health Assembly, so that all member countries have the opportunity to debate this critical issue.

Key Areas of Concern:

- As reported in Secretariat descriptions, the proposed publications policy would require that publications that discuss undefined "controversial" topics to be subjected to special, centralized oversight of the Director-General's office, *in addition* to the technical review process all publications must go through.
- No clarification is given as to what would be defined as "controversial," or how such determinations would be made.
- The definition of "publication" under the proposed policy is extraordinarily broad.
- The proposed policy requires a master list of planned publications to be prepared for executive approval at the beginning of every two-year period.

A detailed analysis of problems with the proposed publications policy is included in a May 15, 2008 letter to WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan from 35 global civil society organizations (including Third World Network; Peoples' Health Movement India & Secretariat; Oxfam International; Knowledge Ecology International, IBFAN International, Africa, Asia, Latin America & Caribbean; Health Action International; Consumers' Association Malaysia, the American Medical Students Association; and Essential Action). The letter is available at: <http://lists.essentialaction.org/pipermail/ip-health/2008-May/012668.html>

What are "Controversial" health-related issues?

An extra layer of review of WHO documents threatens to slow the WHO publication process, impede efficiency with bureaucracy, undermine the agency's flexibility, and interfere with country offices' ability to respond quickly to local circumstances.

¹ See WHO Secretariat reports titled "WHO publication policy" (EBPBAC6/4, 3 May 2007); "WHO Publications" (EB122/20, 6 December 2007); "WHO publications policy: guidance on implementation and evaluation" (EB123/7, 14 April 2008).

The policy is more troubling for focusing on "controversial" issues, an undefined and potentially extremely broad term. In practice, the policy is likely to chill WHO staff willingness to address controversial issues, burden the Director General's Office with excessive reviewing duties, and inappropriately give commercial and ideological interests an opportunity to interfere in the WHO publication process.

To illustrate the danger of creating a special clearance process for "controversial" health-related issues in WHO publications, consider the wide variety of important topics that are currently viewed as controversial, or that were viewed as controversial in the recent past, with respect to their impact on human health:

- Alcohol
- Diet and Nutrition
- Sugar consumption
- Tobacco
- Chemical exposure
- Climate change
- Reproductive Health issues (for example birth control, abortion and sex education)
- Health interventions targeting sex workers
- Traditional Medicine
- Advertising/Marketing of pharmaceuticals, vaccines, and other medical products
- Price of pharmaceuticals, vaccines and other medical products
- Rational use of Medicines

Indeed, the WHO is in the midst of adopting a work program on Public Health, Innovation and Intellectual Property (IP). The work program as currently drafted charges WHO with providing information and technical assistance at the country level on topics such as patent policy, use of TRIPS flexibilities to promote access to medicines, adoption and implementation of national competition policies to prevent or remedy anti-competitive practices related to the use of medicinal patents, and use of measures to encourage medical technology innovation. The WHO's ability to undertake this work effectively will be in doubt if the new publication policy goes into effect because IP rights and health are already a subject of controversy.

WHO mandated to provide accurate, evidence-based health information

The WHO has a constitutional duty to provide objective and reliable information, counsel and assistance in the field of human health. Thus it is appropriate for the WHO to propose changes to its publications policy that would *enhance* the technical quality of its information products. But the proposed policy changes threaten to *do the opposite*, by subverting the WHO's ability to issue technically accurate, evidence-based public health materials. This is even more troubling given that the policy does not give a clear rationale as to why such changes are needed.

The proposed publications policy should be amended to exclude the problematic sections, and should not be passed by the Executive Board until such revisions are made. WHO publications must reflect the latest scientific and medical research. Public health interests must supercede all other interests at the leading international public health agency.

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