

## New neglected disease research scheme pools IP and expertise

WIPO Re:Search aims to encourage drug discovery for neglected diseases by broadening the scope of the assets members are willing to share.

*Simon Frantz*

A consortium of private and public organizations launched in October 2011 by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) aims to accelerate the discovery and development of new drugs, vaccines and diagnostics for neglected tropical diseases, malaria and tuberculosis. Because much of the knowledge and data essential for efficient drug discovery are not patented, patentable or publicly available, the new initiative — called [WIPO Re:Search](#) — intends to pool not just intellectual property (IP) but also intellectual capital, including screening hits, expertise and know-how.

“What we’re trying to do is to take out some of the error from the trial-and-error process of drug discovery, so that neglected tropical disease researchers, many of whom may be coming from the developing world, can have the same level of expertise or resources that big companies have at their disposal,” says Donald Joseph, COO of BIO Ventures for Global Health (BVGH), the non-profit organization that is administering the initiative. “Knowing what’s worked before, what hasn’t worked, that’s the kind of access we’re trying to provide and make available.”

The initiative reflects a growing trend towards openness in tackling global health challenges. The Medicines Patent Pool, launched last year, focuses on making products that are already approved for HIV/AIDS available on favourable terms to developing world markets. WIPO Re:Search, however, has grown out

of GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)’s Pool for Open Innovation for Neglected Tropical Diseases (POINT), which was launched in 2009 to bolster the early-stage neglected disease pipeline by providing a platform to share IP.

POINT, which is now absorbed into the new initiative, was to some extent limited in that it was perceived to be a GSK-only initiative, says Joseph. It led to only one publicly disclosed partnership, in which GSK, iThemba Pharmaceuticals and the Emory Institute of Drug Discovery started working together to develop inhibitors of malate synthase and isocitrate lyase as targets for latent-stage tuberculosis. “It wasn’t as though [POINT] was doing anything wrong or ineffectively, but simply that [WIPO Re:Search] turbo-charges the effort, and gets more scale, more depth, more scope,” says Joseph. WIPO Re:Search has already signed up major pharmaceutical companies — including AstraZeneca, GSK, Novartis, Pfizer and Sanofi — academic institutes and non-profit organizations like the Drugs for Neglected Diseases initiative (DNDi).

One lesson Joseph says they learned from administering POINT is the constraints of restricting assets to IP. “Scientists don’t typically think in terms of IP, they think in terms of the knowledge that they have, and the knowledge that they need for the experiments that they want to generate and the clinical trials that they want to run,” he says. “I’m not saying patent pools are a bad model. It’s more the idea of broadening the scope beyond pure IP to reach what actually happens in the labs and what happens in relationships, and so it was

a conscious part of WIPO Re:Search to engage expertise and services.”

Some companies, for instance, intend to host neglected disease researchers in their facilities. “We’ll be opening up access to AstraZeneca labs and will consider requests from neglected disease scientists wishing to work on their targets,” says Manos Perros, Vice President and Head of Infection Innovative Medicines at AstraZeneca. “Guest scientists will benefit from scientific mentoring and access to innovative technologies including cheminformatics support, and it’s also an opportunity for us to learn from other researchers how they are thinking about diseases and mechanisms of actions for treating those diseases.”

For Bernard Pécoul, Executive Director of DNDi, the scheme is “clearly a step in the right direction”. Yet he remains critical of its narrow scope. Whereas it currently aims to improve access to neglected disease medicines in just the 49 least-developed countries, he thinks it should aim to increase access for all developing countries. Access is important, says Joseph, but the aim in initial stages is to get as much engagement as possible.

Although the initiative is not about making money, profit is nevertheless always a powerful motivating factor, says Jeremy Phillips, Editor of *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice*. He therefore proposes that one way to increase the scheme’s odds of success could be to bolt on financial incentives like tax breaks and entitlement to investment grants. “After all, one of the reasons why neglected tropical diseases are neglected is that there’s no material incentive to un-neglect them.”