A Review of the Congressional Hearing on HIV Drug Pricing

In the form of direct quotes from the participants

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For most Americans, having the time to sit down and watch an entire Congressional hearing is a luxury that they simply don't have. If they hear about the goings on in a Congressional hearing—and that is a big if—it is usually filtered through a talking head on a 24 hour news network or summarized in 2 or 3 sentences by a journalist. Of course, oftentimes the reasons for such brisk recaps of Congressional proceedings are rooted in the fact that they are steeped in legislative minutiae and can be inescapably, unbearably dull.

At AIDS United, we feel as if it would be a disservice if the recent Congressional hearing on drug pricing around Gilead Sciences' HIV prevention drug Truvada was given this treatment. Given the tremendous need for affordable and easily accessible Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP), the controversy surrounding the revelation that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) hold the patents for the use of Truvada as PrEP, and the recently filed lawsuit by HIV activists accusing pharmaceutical companies of conspiring to block competition from generic HIV medications, it just makes sense to do a deeper dive into what was discussed at this hearing.

Shortly after the hearing had concluded, AIDS United released a statement lauding the dedication of an entire hearing to PrEP as a welcome indication of House leadership's commitment to ending the HIV epidemic in the U.S. However, in an effort to best encapsulate the powerful nature of the testimony of the HIV advocates present at the hearing and the remarks of many of the members of the House, we thought it was best to provide you with their own words:

Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-MD-07), Chair of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform:

"I applaud Gilead, but there is nothing like holding the hand of someone who is dying from AIDS. I'm sorry. And all we're trying to do is represent our constituents & help them stay alive. When you're dead, you're dead!

"People know there's something out there called Truvada…They don't know who makes it, but they know there's something that could save their life and they're reaching trying to get it and then they hear about these figures [Rx drug costs] and they just can't get there."

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY-14):

“We the public developed this drug, paid for this drug, we led & developed all the grounding patents to create PrEP & then that patent has been privatized, despite the fact that the patent is owned by the public.”

Tim Horn, Director of Medication Access and Pricing for the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD):

“Partnerships with pharmaceutical manufacturers will always be important, but outsized dependency on their generosity, which in turn is dependent on their bottom line, is by no means an equitable or sustainable solution.”

Daniel O’Day, CEO of Gilead Sciences

“If we had lowered the prices of our medicines even a decade ago, we wouldn’t be sitting here today with the innovations that are changing the face of HIV/AIDS.”

Dr. Robert Grant, PrEP Researcher and Professor at University of California San Francisco:

“Gilead did not provide leadership, innovation or funding for PrEP research. Gilead’s role was limited to donating research drugs and placebos.”

Rep. Chip Roy (R-TX-21):

“It is a reasonable question, when patents expire, when they should expire…but to sit here and attack the capitalistic system that produces and distributes medicines that are saving lives around the world? I mean, it is just offensive. I mean, I just cannot possibly understand why we’re spending time sitting here listening to people lecturing companies about making money. I hope you [Gilead Sciences] make a lot of money!”

Dr. Rochelle Walensky, Chief of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Massachusetts General Hospital:

“It’s not that I don’t believe that companies need to profit. I do believe companies need to profit. I do believe we need new drugs. We certainly need them in HIV. We need them in anti-microbials. We need them in a lot of different places. But I do believe Gilead has already profited enough [from the sale of Truvada], especially in the context of a Presidential call to end the epidemic.”

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