BREAKING THE STRANGLEHOLD OF BIG PHARMA

It’s a page out of the classic playbook: a Liberal government proposing progressive policies to appease voters then engaging in endless delay tactics when it comes to implementation.

The federal Liberals have been promising pharmacare for almost 25 years. It’s no surprise why: the idea is overwhelmingly popular with the public. A poll last year found that almost nine out of 10 Canadians support a national pharmacare program.

But despite their rhetoric, successive Liberal governments have been buckling under the pressure coming from Big Pharma, which has been pulling out all the stops to prevent the realization of universal pharmacare. In 2018, Prime Minister Trudeau appointed an advisory council for the implementation of pharmacare. And he made that promise a central part of his campaign when he ran for re-election in 2019. But in the two years since, he took little meaningful action to move Canada towards a national program. Liberal MPs also refused to support a private member’s bill from the NDP in early 2021 that would set the legal framework for a provincially-run, universal, public pharmacare system.

Most recently, in the lead-up to the 2021 federal election, the Trudeau government announced a partnership with PEI that it says is “the first agreement to accelerate national universal pharmacare.” While that deal will enhance the province’s drug plan for those already covered, it is a far cry from universal pharmacare. The Liberal 2021 election platform also contained no new spending or timelines dedicated to moving forward on national pharmacare.

Multinational pharmaceutical companies have used their outsized power to stall or undermine the implementation of pharmacare at every turn. A search of the lobby registry reveals that federal government officials had a total of at least 555 contacts from Big Pharma, private insurers, and pharma-funded patient advocacy groups in the year 2020 alone.

In their most recent push, corporate lobbyists have aggressively targeted plans by the Liberal government to lower the price of patented drugs – the biggest reform to Canada’s drug price regime in more than 30 years and a crucial step towards the realization of a publicly-paid national pharmacare program.

Since the government first proposed these regulations in 2019, Big Pharma has flooded the parliamentary committee studying these changes with objections, even issuing veiled threats about the availability of COVID-19 vaccines at the height of the pandemic.

The pharma lobby’s aggressive push appears to have had the desired effect: the federal government has now three times delayed the implementation of these drug-pricing changes.

The power of the Big Pharma lobby also helps explain the government’s stubborn refusal to support a waiver of intellectual property protections on COVID-19 vaccines at the World Trade Organization – even after the United States joined more than 100 other countries in supporting that call.

But the pandemic has also been an abject lesson about the dangers of leaving life-saving vaccines and treatments in the hands of the free market. Allowing pharmaceutical companies to dictate how they are manufactured and distributed around the world has kept vaccines out of reach for billions of people in lower-income nations.

And while many of us sat in awe of the formidable power of science and innovation in saving lives at record speed, the pandemic also quickly taught us that we are at the mercy of pharmaceutical companies for getting that research out of labs and into people’s arms.

But even as the pandemic exposed the dangers of Big Pharma’s power over our lives, Trudeau’s government worked to tighten that grip even further. Rather than expand publicly owned domestic production capacity in Canada – building on Canada’s legacy as a leader in vaccine development and distribution – the government pumped even more public money into deals with pharmaceutical giants like Sanofi, Moderna, and Emergent BioSolutions.

We can’t entrust private multinationals, whose sole motive is to maximize profits, with protecting human life. For that, we need elected leaders who choose to serve us, not corporate lobbyists. CP

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