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SNP WARNING ON MEDICAL PATENTS

SNP Member of the European Parliament, Ian Hudghton, has warned against any attempts by research companies to cash in on a major new joint research programme into TB, HIV/Aids and malaria through medical patents. Mr Hudghton is writing the Budget Committee's response to a Commission proposal on clinical research. The five-year, 600 million Euro project will harness expertise from the EU, Norway and from developing, to research cures for these killer diseases.

Mr Hudghton describes the project as a "major boost to fighting poverty-related disease across the developing countries of the world". But he warns that attempts to profit commercially from the research via patenting could seriously thwart the underlying aims of the programme and make medicines restrictively expensive for those in the developing world who most need them.

Speaking after a meeting of the Budget's Committee in Brussels, where the report's first reading gained Committee approval today, Mr Hudghton said:

"I welcome this initiative and look forward to finalising my Committee's response. It is shameful that in the 21st century the annual death toll from HIV/Aids, malaria and TB is in excess of five million. And it is tragic that 95 per cent of these deaths are in the countries of the developing world.

"The EU has a moral and humanitarian duty to provide a positive and effective response to this disaster and I believe this initiative can play a significant part. Scientific and medical expertise from the European Union, Norway and, most significantly, those who work in some of the poorest countries of the world will be drawn together under a new partnership - The European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership. It will be funded three ways - by the EU's research budget, by the Governments of the member states and Norway, and by industry and charitable sources - each contributing a total of 200 million euros between 2003 and 2007.

"The EDCTP must not be viewed as a free-for-all to enable pharmaceutical companies to make big bucks. If medical patents price out those countries most in need of the new treatments we might as well tear up the report here and now. My first draft report to the Commission's paper contains that warning and I shall continue to argue this point as the report makes its way through Parliament."

Welcoming the EU's initiative and backing Mr Hudghton's views on patenting, the SNP's deputy spokesperson on health, Shona Robison said:

"This is a significant initiative in tackling the scourge of poverty-related diseases in the developing world. Money is urgently needed to carry out life-saving research to cut death rates in countries like In Botswana and Swaziland where nearly 4 in 10 adults is HIV positive. It would be a travesty of justice if research funded mainly from the public purse, is hijacked by those who put profits before human life."

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