

# Six-nation TPP bloc rallies against US

By JOANNA HEATH

NEW ZEALAND and Australia are part of a push to counter pressure from the United States to increase protection for pharmaceutical patents.

Public health advocates say the US proposal, part of talks on a free-trade deal for the Pacific region, could bring higher prices for medicines if it is successful.

According to sources who took part in the 18th round of negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in Malaysia, Australia has joined a bloc of five other nations, including New Zealand, Malaysia and Canada to table a counter-proposal to a US-led push for extensions to the life of pharmaceutical patents.

The process, known as "evergreening", allows pharmaceutical companies to seek new patents on existing drugs by making small changes to their formulation, delaying the entry of cheaper generic alternatives.

The TPP is an initiative of US president

Barack Obama and would create a free-trade area around the Pacific Rim, including Australia, the US, Canada, New Zealand and developing countries such as Vietnam and Chile. Negotiators are rushing to finalise a deal by October this year, with the next round of talks due to start in Brunei next month.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade would not comment on the specifics of the negotiations, which are kept secret, but a spokeswoman for Trade Minister Richard Marles said the federal government "will not accept any TPP outcome which undermines the integrity of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) or which compromises Australian health policy more generally".

Policy adviser for consumer group Choice, Angela McDougall, said there were concerns another clause could be introduced which would prevent countries with pharmaceutical buying schemes from determining the prices at which drugs were offered to the consumer.

"A lot of the parties to the TPP don't

have pharmaceutical benefits schemes yet. And the ones that do have even more limited resources than our government. So we would not want to see any right for pharmaceutical companies to challenge those decisions," McDougall said.

Public Health Association chief executive Michael Moore argued Australia should push for an exemption to any clauses in the agreement with the potential to impact on public health.

If both provisions got through, Moore said, "we would see a very significant undermining of the PBS, and . . . the generic medicines trade".

It is understood the US will also seek to table a clause that would give pharmaceutical companies 12 years of data-exclusivity for biologic medicines in the next round of negotiations in Brunei.

Data-exclusivity means clinical data provided to governments for the purposes of regulatory approval cannot be accessed by competitors, effectively delaying the preparation of generic drugs.

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