What is Transparency?

'Transparency' is the property of being able to see through something. In financial and political terms 'transparency' has come to mean the full, clear and timely disclosure of relevant information, that in turn makes for easier understanding and encourages public scrutiny of processes and practices.

A pharmaceutical market in any country should provide essential health commodities – including medicines, vaccines, contraceptives, diagnostics and laboratory supplies. These all need to be easily accessible by the consumer, in a timely manner, of a good quality, and at an affordable cost.

Access to medicines

The range, quality and price of essential medicines available to the consumer are determined through highly complex interactions between the supply side and demand side of the pharmaceutical market. Supply side (including public and private producers, procurers and distributors) and demand side (medical practitioners, pharmacists and patients) needs and preferences must be compatible. This is not always easy. Prescribers make choices about what treatments to recommend; so too can pharmacists and other staff at local outlets. Patients and consumers also make their own choices – sometimes driven by their financial capacity to pay for medicines. All of these need to be considered when national level decisions are made about what to procure, register and distribute.

Wider sharing of information about how this complex system functions helps to facilitate the participation of a wide range of people with an interest in the system (stakeholders) – including government agencies, civil society organisations, the private sector, the media, the general public, and international agencies and donors. Knowledge and understanding of how the system functions and how effective it is, encourages increased scrutiny of the wider pharmaceutical market. This can lead to elimination of poor practices and stimulation of innovative and efficient practices. This in turn drives improved access to essential health commodities for the poor and vulnerable.

What are the problems of lack of transparency?

A wide range of problems have been associated with lack of transparency in pharmaceutical markets. These include

- excessive price mark-ups;
- corruption;
- poor forecasting of needed commodities, leading to stock outs;
- large but infrequent orders that burden local infrastructure, leading to product expiry;
- poor quality or counterfeit drugs, and
- increased risk of theft and spoilage through inefficient storage and supply.

The ultimate result of lack of transparency is limited access to essential health commodities for poor and vulnerable people.

How does transparency improve access to medicines?

Improving access to information on medicines procurement, supply, use and effectiveness encourages discussion and analysis among the many stakeholders. This process tends to shift some decision-making power to consumers, and puts greater competitive pressure on suppliers. Wider knowledge sharing can also increase accountability in decision-making. The net effect of this transparency is to improve the functioning of the pharmaceutical market, leading to greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness, better governance, and ultimately better access to essential medicines for poor and vulnerable people.

Transparency of information about medicines procurement and supply leads to the effective monitoring of pharmaceutical market imperfections and helps identify where interventions can be taken to increase market and health system efficiencies, encourage innovative and responsible practices, and assess the ultimate effectiveness of those interventions.

How does the Medicines Transparency Alliance improve transparency?

MeTA is an international alliance that supports participating countries to strengthen the capacity to collect, analyse, disseminate and apply data about medicines quality, availability, pricing and use. It encourages the disclosure of information about the quality, pricing, availability and use of essential health commodities.

As information needs to be accessed from – and shared with – a wide variety of stakeholders, MeTA works as a multi-stakeholder initiative that includes government, civil society and industry. MeTA is concerned primarily with collation and release of data into the public domain, to better inform consumers, civil society organisations and policymakers on issues such as medicine pricing, availability, quality and use. Being able to see through the complex procedures and processes that dictate access to essential medicines for poor and vulnerable people provides a means to make that system more efficient and more effective.

What information needs to be transparent?

MeTA works towards common disclosure about four types of data:

- Quality & registration of medicines
- Availability of medicines
- Medicine pricing
- Policies on ethical promotion of medicines

Given the complexity of medicine provision, there also needs to be wide access to information about supply chain operations; affordability of medicines; equitable access to medicines, and the prescribing and use of medicines. The information in these areas needs to be available to analyse and build a rational approach to the regulation, procurement, supply and data gathering relating to essential health commodities.

MeTA stakeholder dialogue

The various stakeholders involved in pharmaceutical supply and use have different roles to play:

- *National government* roles may include medicines registration, inspection, selection, procurement and distribution.

- *Private sector* roles can include the research and development of medicines (both branded and generic), their distribution and sale (at wholesale and retail levels), as well as provision of insurance mechanisms to pay for treatments.

- *Health services* may be a function of the public or private sector, but they and the people who work in them are instrumental in the prescription and delivery of medicines.

- *Poor and vulnerable communities and individuals* also have a role to play in medicine selection and use. A key task for MeTA is ensuring their voice is heard, listened to and acted upon.

- *Civil society organisations and the media* also have important roles to play in observing, monitoring and reporting on the pharmaceutical market and advocating for effective systems that provide equitable access to essential medicines.