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Cut-price cancer drugs plan stirs up pharmaceuticals

INDIAN pharmaceutical tycoon Yusuf Hamied revolutionised AIDS treatment more than a decade ago by supplying cut-price drugs to the world's poor — and now he wants to do the same for cancer.

Hamied, chairman of generic drugs giant Cipla, last month slashed the cost of three medicines to fight brain, kidney and lung cancer in India, making the drugs up to more than four times cheaper.

"I hope we'll cut prices of many more cancer drugs," he said, adding that he wants to supply the cheaper drugs to Africa and elsewhere. "Reduc-

ing the price of cancer drugs is a humanitarian move."

Hamied, 76, was pilloried by Western drug giants 11 years ago when he broke their monopoly by offering to supply life-saving triple therapy AIDS drug cocktails for under US\$1 (RM3.16) a day — one-thirtieth the price of the multinationals.

The firms branded him an intellectual property thief while he accused them of being "global serial killers" whose high prices were costing the lives of AIDS patients.

"What he did was path-breaking. It has been very important in saving lives, and

what he is doing with cancer drugs is the same," said Leena Menghaney, a lawyer with humanitarian group Medecins sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders).

In 1972, India made only the process for making drugs patentable, not the drugs themselves. This meant firms could "reverse-engineer" or change methods used to make medicines and sell them at up to one-fiftieth of US prices.

The legislation gave a huge leg-up to India's generics industry and gave the nation the nickname "the pharmacy to the Third World".

Hamied believes the phar-

ma giants should let emerging market drugmakers make copycat medicines in exchange for small royalties.

Some 95% of Western firms' profits come from regulated developed markets like Japan, Europe, America, so the pharmaceutical giants "really won't lose out", he said.

Even with the reduced price of generic drugs, such medicines are still beyond the reach of many of the world's poorest, conceded Hamied, who confesses he has his eye on his legacy. "I want it to be said when I leave this world that 'he was not just a money-making machine'." — Reuters