WHO’s “Solidarity” Clinical Trial for COVID-19

- Given the extreme pressure that COVID-19 is placing on health care systems worldwide, there is a pressing need to expeditiously identify therapies that can slow the progression of the disease in patients and/or increase the chances of survival. While randomized clinical trials normally take years to design and conduct, the world is currently in the midst of a fast-moving pandemic, and time is not on our side.

- As a result, on March 20th, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced “Solidarity,” an international clinical trial that seeks to rapidly identify effective treatments for COVID-19. Currently, 1200 patients have already been randomized from five countries, with 600 hospitals ready to begin enrolling patients this week.

- The trial seeks to compare the safety and efficacy of four different medications: Remdesivir, an experimental drug that has shown some promise in animal tests on two other coronaviruses—MERS and SARS; Lopinavir/Ritonavir, a drug combination used to treat HIV; Interferon beta-1a, used to treat multiple sclerosis; and chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, drugs that are used to treat malaria and rheumatological conditions, respectively. As data becomes available, the list of drugs being tested could be modified, with the addition of new therapies or deletion of older ones.

- The trial is designed to be as simple as possible so that it can be replicated even in hospitals that have been overwhelmed by an onslaught of cases. When a patient is deemed eligible to participate and consents, a physician will enter the patient’s data, including underlying conditions that could affect the course of treatment, into a WHO website which will then randomly assign a treatment option, consisting of either the local standard of care or the local of standard of care plus one of the above-mentioned treatments. The list of drugs being tested was put together for WHO by a panel of scientists that has been assessing evidence on candidate therapies since January. Their choices were based on the likelihood that the drugs in question would actually work, safety data from previous use, and whether they are available in sufficient supplies to treat large numbers of patients if found effective.

- As noted above, it is also designed to be fast. Indeed, according to the WHO, the Solidarity trial will reduce the amount of time it normally takes for a drug trial to determine effectiveness by 80%. This, combined with the size and geographic breadth of the trial, will hopefully provide a strong evidentiary basis behind specific therapies that can then be acted upon quickly by health systems.

- WHO is working with developers to ensure the affordability and availability of the treatments if they prove effective, and U.S. companies are uniquely positioned to be a part of that effort.

- Although the U.S. has not yet joined the Solidarity Trial, all Americans stand to benefit from this type of multilateral coordination. Only the WHO—with its broad membership, global reach, and international legitimacy—can bring this to bear.