

**Statement by Medicus Mundi International
to the 67th session of the World Health Assembly
on agenda item 16.3 Smallpox to be delivered by Patricia Thomas**

Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to address the Assembly on behalf of Medicus Mundi International, the People's Health Movement and the Third World Network.

Our organisations join with over 50 civil society organizations worldwide to call this Health Assembly to fix a prompt and irrevocable date for the destruction of smallpox virus stocks.

All elements of the WHA's authorized research programme requiring smallpox virus are complete. WHO's public health experts have concluded that no public health reason remains for continued retention.

The case for retaining the virus appears to rest on the risk of unauthorized or unforeseen release of virus. The remaining virus stocks are held, however, at WHO-authorized repositories.

The continued existence of viral stocks carries a significant risk through lapses in laboratory biosafety or security. This is a real, not purely conjectural risk.

A worrying argument advanced in support of retaining the virus is that research may be needed to evaluate alleged "threats" related to biotechnology. This may lead to proposals to perform genetic engineering and synthesis experiments with the virus, under the auspices of WHO, potentially setting dangerous and unwise precedents for the application of biotechnology to infectious disease agents.

The WHA has prohibited genetic engineering of smallpox, and WHO has existing rules on the synthesis, possession, and use of smallpox DNA. However, if there is a perceived risk of unsanctioned synthesis of viral material, this should be addressed by a comprehensive review of current controls synthesis and possession of smallpox DNA and the imposition of tighter and more effective controls.

The immediate destruction of the known stocks is the single most effective measure that can be taken at this stage to reduce any possibility of reappearance of smallpox virus, either accidental or deliberate

Thank you.