



Press Release

Civil society call for end to double standard in diabetes care as SA's Competition Commission launches critical investigation for insulin pens and more – Novo Nordisk and Sanofi-Aventis

Johannesburg – Wednesday 26 February 2025: The Health Justice Initiative (HJI) welcomes the South African Competition Commission's initiation of a formal investigation into pharmaceutical corporations Novo Nordisk (Pty) Ltd and Sanofi-Aventis South Africa (Pty) Ltd regarding potential anti-competitive practices in the insulin pen market.

The investigation will examine whether multiple device patents and proprietary designs are being used to exclude competition and prevent the entry of alternative suppliers. The investigation stems from Novo Nordisk's October 2023 decision to cease tendering for insulin pens to the SA National Department of Health, instead offering only insulin vials. This change left [South Africa's public healthcare sector without a contracted supplier of insulin pens for 2024](#), potentially affecting thousands of diabetes patients.

HJI and its partners are committed to supporting the Commission's investigation by contributing detailed submissions, and are also calling for a comprehensive regulatory investigation into potential anti-competitive practices across South Africa's *entire* insulin market.

Despite their clinical [advantages](#), insulin pens remain largely unavailable and unaffordable in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

Ahead of World Diabetes Day in 2024, HJI, TAC and MSF called on pharmaceutical corporations Eli Lilly, Novo Nordisk, Sanofi, and other insulin manufacturers to make all insulin pen devices (human and analogue) available at US\$1 per pen in all LMICs, based on [data published by MSF](#) estimating that insulin pens could cost as little as \$0.94 per pen, including a profit.

Diabetes is considered a major public health crisis in SA, where it is now the **number one cause of death for women and second leading cause of death for men**. Just under [5 million people are estimated to have diabetes in South Africa](#).

However, SA, one of the [first](#) LMICs to provide human insulin in pen devices (in 2014), faced a major setback in diabetes care as the three major corporations (Novo Nordisk, Sanofi and Eli Lilly) refused to respond to the government tender issued in 2023. With no other option left, the South African government began procuring expensive analogue pens from Sanofi at a much higher price, ranging between \$2,24 for long acting analogue pens and \$4,26 for ultra-fast acting analogue pens.

In 2023, Novo Nordisk also signed an exclusive deal with SA manufacturer Aspen Pharmacare to supply human insulin in **vials** for Africa. However, the detailed conditions of this agreement have not been made public, and it worryingly appears that Novo is preventing Aspen from producing human insulin in **pens**,

which is what is primarily needed in SA to keep treatment mechanisms constant for people who shifted to using pens in 2014.

The lack of access to insulin pens in South Africa has been further worsened by Novo Nordisk's recent decision to discontinue the production of human insulin in pen devices. Instead, the corporation is prioritising the production and marketing of more lucrative medicines in pens, such as GLP-1s like brands Ozempic and Wegovy, [used](#) for diabetes and weight loss, which are marketed and sold at extremely high prices in high-income countries.

Fatima Hassan, Director, Health Justice Initiative:

"The investigation by the Competition Commission against Novo Nordisk and Sanofi is long overdue. There can be no room for monopolistic behaviour by big pharma when it comes to lifesaving medicines and devices, who are now, for diabetes care, trying to take us back to the dark ages. It is high time the SA government took action to hold both companies accountable and to better regulate the medicine licensing, access, and pricing landscape, especially as the health department prepares to become the country's single medical products procurer under National Health Insurance (NHI).

We also urge the Competition Commission to look into the licensing agreement between Novo Nordisk and its licensee Aspen Pharmacare, which may also be contributing to a generic monopoly on diabetes products. We hope that the Commission will also examine whether the recent shift in manufacturing focus towards weight loss pens has contributed to insulin pen supply issues, potentially harming diabetes patients who must revert to using vials.

The power of pharmaceutical corporations to make business decisions that affect the government's ability to provide the standard of care needed to save people's lives must come to an end."

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Media Queries

For media related queries and interview requests, please contact Angie Richardson at angie@thepressoffice.net or on 083 397 2512.

About HJI

[Health Justice Initiative \(HJI\)](#) is a South African public health and law initiative focusing on addressing inequality in healthcare access and advocating for equitable and fair access to healthcare.

Media Fact Sheet

1. The Crisis

Diabetes represents a critical health challenge in South Africa, ranking as the leading cause of death among women and the second leading cause of death among men. Just under 5 million South Africans are estimated to live with diabetes, yet access to modern insulin delivery systems is becoming increasingly restricted.¹

¹<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10218408/#:~:text=The%20prevalence%20of%20diabetes%20mellitus,%25%20were%20undiagnosed%20%5B%5D.>

2. The Manufacturing Problem

Novo Nordisk, the largest corporation in Europe, has decided to halt the manufacturing and supply of human insulin pens to South Africa and globally. This decision appears driven by their shift toward producing more profitable GLP-1 medicines (Ozempic and Wegovy²) for high-income countries, forcing many South African patients to revert from insulin pens to vials and syringes.³

3. The Double Standard

While people in high-income countries continue to receive insulin pens as the standard of care, South African patients face rationing and restricted access to pens; rather, Novo offered human insulin in vials instead of pens for this last tender. This perpetuates an unacceptable double standard in diabetes care between wealthy and developing nations. Research shows that 82 percent of people with diabetes prefer insulin pens due to improved accuracy, ease of use, and reduced stigma.⁴

4. The Economic Reality

Current research published in the Journal of the American Medical Association⁵ demonstrates that insulin pens could be manufactured and sold profitably for approximately one dollar per pen. However, prices remain significantly higher, ranging from nearly two dollars in South Africa to over ninety dollars in the United States. Meanwhile, Novo Nordisk's share price rose over 50 percent in 2023, with projected revenue of 37.4 billion Euros in 2024.⁶

5. The Historical Context

Insulin was discovered over 100 years ago, with its original patent sold for just one dollar to ensure universal access. Today, three companies - Novo Nordisk, Eli Lilly, and Sanofi - control approximately 90 percent of the global insulin market. This concentration of power has led to pricing and supply decisions that prioritize profit over access to essential medicine.⁷

6. The Impact

South Africa pioneered the shift toward insulin pen use in the public sector in 2014, demonstrating leadership in improving diabetes care.⁸ The current manufacturing decisions threaten to reverse this progress, affecting millions of patients who depend on insulin pens for their daily diabetes management. This regression in care standards particularly impacts on those who must inject insulin multiple times daily at work, school, or in public settings.⁹

² <https://www.webmd.com/obesity/mounjaro-ozempic-wegovy-zepbound-difference>

³ <https://www.msf.org.za/news-and-resources/press-release/pharmaceutical-corporations-eli-lilly-novo-nordisk-and-sanofi-must>

⁴ <https://msfaccess.org/defeating-double-standard-diabetes-care>

⁵ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2816824>

⁶ <https://www.euronews.com/business/2023/12/05/novo-nordisk-ascent-will-europes-biggest-company-continue-to-soar>

⁷ https://groundup.org.za/article/msf-slams-norvo-nordisk-for-south-africas-insulin-pen-shortage/#:~:text=This%20covers%2010%20to%2020_with%20its%20human%20insulin%20pens

⁸ <https://allafrica.com/stories/202411130461.html>

⁹ <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/health/2024-04-24-health-department-is-not-buying-life-saving-insulin-pens-for-diabetics/#:~:text=According%20to%20Semdsa%2C%20not%20offering,some%20instances%2C%20have%20fatal%20consequences>