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MEDIA RELEASE

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USFTA will limit democratic decisions on health and other social policies say community organisations

"Prime Minister Howard's claim that the US government may object to the ALP amendments to protect access to cheap medicines show the true threat of the USFTA to health and other policies," Dr Patricia Ranald of the Public Interest Advocacy Centre said today. Dr Ranald convenes the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network (AFTINET), a national network of 90 community organisations that monitors the impact of trade agreements on domestic law and policy.

"This agreement is legally binding and is designed to "lock in" certain policies and to prevent governments from passing legislation contrary to the agreement," said Dr Ranald. "The US government can use the disputes process of the USFTA to challenge Australian laws or policies if they are contrary to the agreement. The trade disputes panel could order them to be changed and could allow the US to impose trade penalties if they are not changed."

"The USFTA sets up joint US Australian committees on medicines on quarantine and in areas like food labelling that will judge our policies on whether the US sees them as barriers to trade, and will exert pressure to move towards US standards. This reduces our rights to determine our own policies in the interests of Australians", added Dr Ranald.

The ALP has said it will pass "safeguard" laws in some of these areas but such laws may be challenged if they are contrary to the agreement. We have argued all through the negotiations that all health, cultural and other social policies should have been totally excluded from the agreement" said Dr Ranald.

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