

Federal Circuit's Sandoz Decision Increases Importance of Post-Grant Proceedings to Biosimilar Developers

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On Friday, December 5, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit rendered its decision in *Sandoz v. Amgen*, No. 2014-1693, a case with major implications for the emerging U.S. biosimilars industry. The decision addresses when and how a party seeking to launch a biosimilar product in the U.S. can initiate litigation to challenge the brand company's potential blocking patents. This is the first instance in which the Federal Circuit has had the opportunity to address the scope and applicability of the Biologics Price Competition and Innovation Act (BPCIA), which established a formal pathway for biosimilar approval in the US.

Background

At issue in *Sandoz* is a litigation Sandoz, Inc. initiated against Amgen, Inc. and Hoffman-La Roche Inc. on June 24, 2013. Sandoz's complaint seeks a declaratory judgment (DJ) that two patents owned by Roche and exclusively licensed to Amgen are invalid, unenforceable, and would not be infringed by the commercial marketing of Sandoz's biosimilar version of Amgen's blockbuster biologic product Enbrel® (etanercept). The patents at issue extend Amgen's protection around etanercept an additional 15 years past the original patents. Sandoz filed its complaint against Amgen prior to filing any application with the FDA for approval to market its biosimilar etanercept product, which is currently in Phase III clinical trials. Sandoz will not file with the FDA until the Phase III trial is complete, and of course will not be able to market its version of etanercept in the US without FDA approval. At the time of suit, Amgen had not alleged Sandoz was currently doing anything that exposes it to liability for infringing Amgen's patents rights around Enbrel®.

The District Court Decision

Amgen moved to dismiss Sandoz's complaint, asserting that the court lacked jurisdiction to hear the case because no immediate and real controversy between the parties exists. In a brief order, the court granted Amgen's motion to dismiss on two separate grounds. First, the court ruled that its discretion to enter a DJ in the case is subject to the provisions of the BPCIA, which sets specific limitations on the timing and conduct of any litigation arising from the filing of an application for approval to market a biosimilar. The court concluded that "neither a reference product sponsor, such

as Amgen, nor [a biosimilar applicant] such as Sandoz, may file a lawsuit unless and until they have engaged in a series of statutorily–mandated exchanges of information” related to patents potentially in dispute. In this case, Sandoz had not complied with the exchanges as it had not even started the process by filing its application with the FDA.

Second, the court found that Sandoz had not established jurisdiction under traditional grounds because it had not established a real and immediate injury or threat of future injury caused by Amgen. The court noted that Amgen had never advised Sandoz that it intended to sue Sandoz, and that the mere allegation by Sandoz that it intended to file an application for FDA approval in the future was not sufficient to create a case or controversy. Sandoz appealed the district court order dismissing the action.

The Federal Circuit Decision

On appeal, Sandoz argued that the litigation provisions of the BPCIA only govern the statutory patent infringement litigation authorized by the Act after a biosimilar application is filed with the FDA, and do not apply to DJ actions in general. Sandoz further argued that nothing in the BPCIA can be construed to bar or limit in any way the ability to bring DJ actions to resolve patent disputes prior to filing a biosimilar application. Finally, Sandoz argued that the district court erred in concluding that Sandoz had not adequately demonstrated a sufficient actual case or controversy sufficient to allow the DJ action to proceed.

The Federal Circuit panel affirmed the district court’s dismissal of Sandoz’s complaint, concluding that Sandoz had not alleged an injury of sufficient immediacy and reality to create subject matter jurisdiction. The Federal Circuit noted that “a case or controversy” is a prerequisite to exercising declaratory judgment jurisdiction. The test for determining whether a case or controversy exists is whether “there is a substantial controversy . . . of sufficient immediacy and reality to warrant the issuance of a declaratory judgment.” The Federal Circuit, however, declined to address the lower court’s interpretation of the BPCIA as barring a lawsuit by either the reference product sponsor or the biosimilar applicant unless and until the parties have engaged in the statutorily-mandated patent information exchanges.

In concluding that Sandoz’s complaint does not present a case or controversy, the Federal Circuit panel noted that there was no prior decision in which the Federal Circuit had found a case or controversy to exist when the only activity that would create exposure to potential infringement liability was a future activity requiring FDA approval that had not yet been sought. The court found the immediacy requirement lacking where the conclusion of Sandoz’s Phase III trial, which was a prerequisite for filing for FDA approval, was still several years away when Sandoz filed suit. The court refused to assume that the Phase III trial would be successful, and noted that the trial could in fact uncover issues with Sandoz’s product that could push the application filing date back even further. Alternatively, the clinical trial could fail resulting in Sandoz never seeking FDA approval, or Sandoz could modify its proposed product and file for approval on the modified product. The court also noted that Sandoz’s complaint lacked specificity as to how Amgen’s patents read or don’t read on Sandoz’s product; and instead relies on prior general assertions by Amgen that the patents at issue cover Enbrel, that Amgen will assert the patents against products that compete with Enbrel, and that Sandoz intends to market a competing product at some point in the future. Ultimately, the court concluded that the events allegedly exposing Sandoz to infringement liability may not occur as anticipated or may not occur at all. The court found that Sandoz also had not shown that it would suffer any “immediate and substantial adverse impact” from not being able to seek or secure a patent adjudication before filing its application for FDA approval.

Unanswered Questions

The Federal Circuit specifically stated that its decision was limited to the particular facts before it, and does not address whether Sandoz would be able to seek declaratory judgment jurisdiction once it files its FDA application, or whether the BPCIA forecloses declaratory judgment actions outside of the statutorily-mandated patent information exchange once the application is accepted by the FDA. The decision also did not clarify the additional issue disputed by the parties concerning what constitutes sufficient “notice of commercial marketing,” which the BPCIA states must be provided by the biosimilar applicant prior to launch.

Increased Important of Post-Grant Proceedings before the USPTO

Although the Sandoz court made a point to limit the scope of its decision to the facts before it, the decision casts substantial doubt on the ability of any biosimilar developer to bring a district court action challenging the reference product sponsor’s patents prior to filing a biosimilar application with the FDA and triggering the patent information exchange provisions of the BPCIA. At the same time, the decision elevates the importance to biosimilar developers of post-grant challenges before the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, such as inter partes review (IPR) and post-grant review (PGR), as means for obtaining some degree of early patent certainty before initiating the FDA approval process. IPRs in particular have proven to be a potent weapon for generic drug manufacturers in the context of ANDA litigation. The lower standard of proof required to show invalidity, the expedited pace of the proceedings, and the decreased cost in comparison to district court litigation coupled with the extremely high rate in which patent claims are being invalidated provide generic manufacturers with tremendous leverage to obtain favorable settlements with brand companies. We expect that the Sandoz decision should only increase the speed with which post-grant proceedings are adopted in the biosimilar arena.

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