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By : S.M. MOHAMED IDRIS, President, Consumers Association of Penang

THE public may or may not be aware that the Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Regulations 2006, which covers private hospitals, medical clinics, dental clinics and other private healthcare facilities, came into force last year.

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These regulations, among others, give legal backing to support patients' rights when it comes to issues related to treatment provided at private hospitals.

Prior to these regulations, patients had very limited options for addressing their grouses regarding services provided by the private healthcare sector.

Some of the complaints from the public have to do with excessive charges and lack of information on billing procedures and treatment offered at private hospitals.

It may help the public to know that patients have the right to receive information, on request, of the estimated charges for services to be provided and of other unanticipated charges for services that are routine or usual.

A patient also has the right to be informed of the private hospital's billing procedures -- prior to the initiation of a particular care or treatment.

The patient can request for itemised billing for the whole course of the treatment without any additional charges being imposed.

The person in charge of a private hospital is required to take reasonable steps to ensure that a patient is provided with information about the nature of his medical condition and any proposed treatment, investigation or procedure and the likely cost of the treatment, investigation or procedure.

The regulations do provide a Fee Schedule which gives a guide on the fees that may be charged by a general practitioner or a specialist doctor.

This Fee Schedule also includes a guide on the charges that can be imposed for various medical procedures.

The person in charge should also establish a patient grievance mechanism plan which includes the appointment of a patient relations officer to act as a liaison between the patient and a private hospital.

Patients who have a grouse against a private hospital can submit their complaint, orally or in writing, directly to the patient relations officer, or via a healthcare professional from that hospital.

The patient relations officer is expected to document all complaints received and resolve the matter.

In the event that the officer cannot resolve the complaint, the matter should be referred to the person in charge of the hospital immediately or not later than three working days.

The person in charge would then be expected to initiate an investigation and provide a reply, which includes the result of the investigation, to the complainant within 10 working days after the complaint is received by the person in charge.

By right, the complainant should also be informed that if he is still dissatisfied, he may refer the matter in writing to the director-general of the Health Ministry.

On receipt of the complaint, the director-general would be expected to notify the complainant and the private hospital, and either conduct a personal investigation or arrange for the complaint to be investigated.

The complainant and the private hospital would then be informed in writing of the director-general's findings or of any recommendations the director-general may have, based on his findings.

Overall, most patients who seek treatment at private hospitals may find that they are treated fairly and with compassion.

However, in the event that patients do experience some difficulties, the regulations have provided an avenue, which previously did not exist, for patients to take their case further.