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Call for more specific guidelines on specialists' fees

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THE specialist charged her RM90 for consultation fees per visit which lasted less than two minutes in a private hospital in Ipoh recently.

The 81-year-old patient who only wished to be known as Wong described the charge as “unreasonable and shocking”.

“The specialist visited me 13 times during my one-week stay in the hospital.

“All he did was greet me and asked me how I felt. All this took less than two minutes,” said Wong who paid a total of RM1,415 as specialist's fee, inclusive of RM245 for the first consultation.



A visit to the doctor's office: The Health Ministry had announced in July that there would be a 14% fee hike for specialists and doctors in the private sector if approved by the Cabinet. —filepic

Wong, who had a surgery to repair a fracture in the femur, said the bill totalled RM26,000 inclusive of the specialist's fees.

At a specialist centre in Butterworth, a patient who had a broken collarbone, said she was glad the bill totalled to only RM347.30.

She said the orthopaedic surgeon charged her RM80 for consultation fees, and he took almost 30 minutes to explain her condition to her and the treatment options.

The surgeon advised her to let the bone heal naturally, and that she might need physiotherapy later to strengthen the bone.

“He said he would only recommend surgery if I were younger and active in sports, like competitive sports,” quipped the 57-year-old teacher.

The balance of her bill comprised RM123.30 for medicine, X-ray (RM60) and arm sling (RM84).

Under the Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Regulations 2006, specialists could charge between RM60 and RM180 for the first consultation, and between RM35 and RM90 for follow-up consultation.

Commenting on Wong's case, KPJ Ipoh Specialist Hospital medical director Datuk Dr Fadzli Cheah explained that the doctors had actually taken note of the patients' condition during ward rounds without the patients' knowledge.

“Specialists could conduct ward visit as many times as they think necessary, but they are allowed to charge up to twice a day,” he said.

He pointed out that specialists were allowed to impose maximum charges under the regulations.

Dr Fadzli, nevertheless, conceded that there should be more specific guidelines on charges instead of relying on the maximum-minimum range.

“The type of expertise and complexity in treatment could be the benchmark to determine consultation fees,” he added.

State executive councillor Datuk Dr Mah Hang Soon, a cardiologist by training, said specialists should use their discretion when deciding on their fees, adding that there had been instances where specialists waived the fees to ease the patients' burden.

“The total bill must also be reasonable and affordable,” he said pointing out that specialist fees are usually between 15% and 20% of the total bill.

Dr Mah was a practising cardiologist for almost a decade before he became a full-time politician three years ago.

General practitioner Dr Kok Yuan Shing said less competition among specialists in Ipoh had pushed their fees up.

There were only four private hospitals and about six medical centres in Ipoh, he added.

“As such, a specialist could charge a maximum fee for a simple ward round, even if it is just a hi-and-bye session with the patient,” said Dr Kok, who has a practice in Kampar.

There are about 5,000 specialists in the country with about 2,000 in the private sector.

A random survey by *The Star* showed that people were generally not aware of the fee range.

Y. P. Teh from Kuala Lumpur said the government should make it compulsory for specialists to display prominently the fee range at their clinic.

“Why the authorities exempt the specialists from displaying their charges but prosecute owners of coffeeshops or sundry shops if they failed to display their price list?,” she asked. Li Bi En from Ipoh said the specialists would

not give a breakdown of the bill for outpatient treatment.

She said she was unaware of the fee range, but had been given the impression that the market rate for specialist fees was between RM80 and RM90 per visit.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai had announced on July 26 that there would be a 14% fee hike for specialists and doctors in the private sector if approved by the Cabinet.

Malaysian Medical Association president Dr S. R. Manalan said the quantum was too low, pointing out that consumers' main grouses were not the specialist or doctor's fees but exorbitant hospital charges and medical insurance premiums.

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