

Bosses worry over fee deregulation

MEF says move to allow doctors to fix their fees will cost employers more

By **CLARISSA CHUNG**
clarissachung@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Employers are concerned about possibly having to fork out higher medical fees for their workers.

This comes following the Health Ministry's announcement to allow private clinics and hospitals to fix their own consultation fees.

Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan said that having such fees open to market forces presented a challenge to companies covering medical costs of their workers.

He said the average cost of outpatient treatment borne by employers amounted to more than RM4,000 per worker yearly.

With about eight million employ-

“... without a proper mechanism to regulate such fees, the sky is the limit.”

Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan

ees in the private sector, he said the cost of outpatient treatment could be a hefty sum for companies.

“Some employers also take up insurance even for outpatient treatment. Following the deregulation, the insurance providers may also increase their premiums.”

Shamsuddin said the deregulation move came as “shocking news”.

The MEF, he said, had previously been involved in discussions on reviewing the fee structure and that it had expected the government to adjust the rates.

Thus, it was a surprise that the government had instead opted to allow doctors to set their own consultation fees.

“Having the fees open to market forces may, in theory, lower the charges but without a mechanism to regulate such fees, the sky is the limit.”

Employers, he said, might also have to face more administrative work in trying to compare consultation fees between different healthcare facilities.

However, Association of Private Hospitals of Malaysia president Datuk Dr Kuljit Singh said that hospitals would charge affordable con-

sultation rates.

“All private hospitals will try to make sure the cost is as low as possible to be competitive. The bills patients see are inclusive of cross-subsidies to other hidden costs of private hospitals,” he said.

Welcoming the government's decision, he said: “It's a good move which doctors have requested for years.”

He also said that increases in healthcare costs were something that the country “cannot run away from”.

“The best way forward is for the government to set up a national healthcare financing system which will ease the burden of the government and enable citizens to take charge of their health from the time they earn their first ringgit,” he said.

On Dec 6, the ministry announced

the fee deregulation but no time frame was set about the starting date.

GPs in private clinics charge consultation fees of between RM10 and RM35 now. These have not been revised since 1992.

Association of Specialists in Private Medical Practice Malaysia president Datuk Dr Balwant Singh Gendeh assured Malaysians that the lifting of the fees schedule would not lead to a cost escalation.

“The present schedules are low and below the normal range in developed and developing countries,” he said.

He said patients should check with the clinic about the fees.

“Obviously, the charges will vary from town to the city, and from specialist to specialist depending on the expertise and experience,” he said.