

Academics call for surgery fees schedule

By JAMIE ALLEN

A FEE schedule should be drawn up to stop certain private surgeons and doctors from over-charging, leading medical academics said yesterday.

The schedule, which could be drawn up by the Government, insurance companies, or both, would help to educate people about what medical care should reasonably cost.

The doctors believe lacking the fees issue in this

way would be a lot more effective than trying to impose direct government regulations in an environment driven by market forces and where private sector doctors dominated the various medical associations.

They said the whole issue was complicated by Hongkong's entrepreneurial environment and the fact that some wealthy people were willing to pay high prices for surgery and other forms of care.

The reaction came after reports that a study conducted in Britain by BUPA International Medical Insurance Limited showed private surgeons in Hongkong charge the highest fees in the world for major operations.

A heart bypass operation in Hongkong can cost up to \$50,000 - almost eight times as much as in the United Kingdom and more than twice the cost in New York.

Professor David Todd, professor of medicine at the University of Hongkong, said much of the problem lay in the public not knowing what they should pay for a given operation and said issues could be sorted out through education.

He said counter-action should be taken from the users' side. "If I pay for something and I find it too expensive I go to another shop", he said.

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tients can assess the fees accordingly," said Professor Todd, who is also the chairman of the Preparatory Committee of the Academy of Medicine.

It was unlikely the academy, when it is set up, would look into the fees issue. It would concentrate mainly on academic pursuits along the lines of the royal colleges in the UK, Professor Todd said.

A medical academic in another institution said the best way to stop unscrupulous medical people abusing patients was education.

Drawing up a schedule of reasonable fees would also improve Hongkong's international medical image, while allowing more government doctors the time to treat private patients within a set fee structure would create a "market buffer", he believed.

The doctor claimed

many local doctors were not interested in developing a long-term relationship with the community, as doctors had to do in other countries, because they were planning to leave before 1997.

But he added: "The problem here is not over-charging, it is that there is no consistent charging. Different patients pay different fees. The doctor charges according to what he can make out of the patient. This is unprofessional."

Professor Arthur Li Kwok-cheung, professor and chairman of the Department of Surgery at the Chinese University, said some of the medical fees charged in Hongkong were "phenomenally high", but the problem was just as bad in other professions.

He said it would never be possible to control the fees charged in Hongkong because private sector doctors outnumbered government or institutional doc-

tors and dominated the medical associations.

"Nothing can be done because the private sector is so powerful and there are vested interest groups," he said.

Professor Li claimed the general attitude in the medical profession was that "if you did not make lots of money you can not be any good".

"The population thinks someone who charges more must be good," he added.