



Hospital crusade on 'cuts'

Our Special Correspondent

New Delhi, June 28: A private hospital in Mumbai has initiated what it hopes will be a "crusade" from within the medical community against commissions, or cuts, that doctors have to pay their own colleagues for referring patients for diagnosis and treatment.

The Asian Heart Institute (AHI), which had earlier this month angered sections of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) by putting up billboards saying its doctors don't engage in such cut-practice, today said doctors across India had articulated their support for its campaign.

Although the issue is seldom discussed openly, many doctors have long been concerned about commissions demanded by fellow doctors for referring patients for either diagnostic tests in pathology laboratories or X-ray, CT or MRI scans or for treatment or surgery.

"It is rampant, but few talk about it. A public discourse against cut practice is important to build a momentum against it," said Ramakant Panda, a cardiothoracic surgeon and director at the AHI.

Some doctors believe that the demand for cuts adds to the medical expenses of patients. "Many young doctors in private practice have told us that they are forced to pay commissions to receive patient referrals - many such doctors pay a significant part of their earnings as commissions," Panda said.

The hospital today called a press conference and said a core committee of eminent doctors from across India who have articulated their support to the campaign would take up the issue with medical regulators.

"Unfortunately, a few hospitals are indulging in the unethical practice of accepting or offering kickbacks for patient referrals - this should be resisted by all medical professionals," said Devi Shetty, chairman and founder of Narayana Health, Bangalore.

Samiran Nundy, a senior gastrointestinal surgeon at the Sir Ganga Ram Hospital, New Delhi, who had two years ago stirred a debate on unethical practices in medicine, said commissions for referrals might exist in other countries too. "But many countries have strict monitoring bodies that dole out tough punishment for wrongdoing by doctors - that is missing in India."

Panda said he was hoping that doctors across the country would join the campaign. "We have received messages from radiologists in Kanpur and Nashik and Bhyandar-Mira Road (a suburb north of Mumbai) that they will not pay commissions," he said.

Doctors say the secrecy underlying cut-practice makes it impossible to document the levels of commissions sought or paid, except when doctors cite anecdotes.