

The Island

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Fleecing the public

Doctors have looked askance at a government proposal to introduce regulations on channelling fees to prevent the exploitation of patients. Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA) President Dr. Anuruddha Padeniya has taken exception to the proposed regulations and asked why other professionals like lawyers and architects have been exempted. Doctors, he has said, are being discriminated against. Yes, they must also be made to realise that the sky is not the limit.

The issue of extortionate channelling fees should have been addressed by doctors' associations a long time ago without leaving it to politicians. At least, now, they ought to examine it critically and dispassionately and propose a solution. Self-regulation, we believe, is the best way out.

Doctors have taken up the cudgels for patients' rights and campaigned for a national drug policy to prevent Big Pharma from exploiting the sick; they have also taken on powerful multinational companies that dump contaminated food items and deadly agrochemicals here. But for the government doctors' intervention the issue of milk powder containing DCD would have been swept under the carpet. These are, no doubt, very progressive moves which have stood the people in good stead. The onus is on the doctors' associations to go a step ahead and ensure that their members act responsibly without bringing their noble profession into disrepute.

The same goes for other professions. Lawyers squeeze clients dry and the tax man has no way of knowing how much they earn. The Consumer Affairs Authority tells us that traders have to issue receipts for even small amounts of money they receive from customers. But, there is no such legal requirement where lawyers' fees are concerned. We have lawyers' associations that moralise and pontificate to politicians about the virtues of good governance and the rule of law *ad nauseam!*

Most patients will vouch for the fact that they pay through the nose for channelling doctors and wait for hours on end at crowded hospitals, exposing themselves to various infections in the process, only to be examined hurriedly by most medical specialists who are always in a mighty rush. In some cases doctors do not turn up and patients including those who come from faraway places are turned away close to midnight. The ordinary people choose to suffer in silence. There are, of course, good doctors who are considerate towards patients and render a valuable service to the public for a reasonable fee, but, sadly, the same cannot be said of others. Minister of Health Maithirpala Sirisena says he himself has been fleeced by some unscrupulous doctors in the past. He has recalled an instance where one of his friends had to pay as much as Rs. 8,000 to see a medical specialist at a channeling centre.

The Organisation of Professional Associations (OPA) is fighting for the rights of the public from the front. The role it plays as a watchdog and advocacy group, among other things, is to be highly appreciated. It should give serious thought to the issue of extortionate professional fees and propose a solution.

The government also exploits the public while condemning others for doing so. It uses some of the state-owned ventures like the Ceylon Electricity Board, the Petroleum Corporation and the National Water Supply and Drainage Board for this purpose. These ventures have been fleecing their customers with impunity under successive governments. True, some relief has been given of late, but it is woefully inadequate. Before preventing others from exploiting the people the government should put its own house in order.