

# ACCREDITATION

## THE PUBLIC GETS A VOICE

For decades, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals, financially supported by the same hospitals it studies, has been setting standards for hospital health care in this country. Only JCAH-accredited hospitals are reimbursed by Medicare, and, in many cases, Blue Cross also restricts its coverage to accredited institutions.

Many critics of the JCAH are unhappy with what they see as the self-serving nature of the alliance between JCAH and its hospital supporters. No member of the press or the public may accompany JCAH officials on a hospital survey, they point out, or see results of the survey unless the hospital releases them. Hospitals, on the other hand, are notified months in advance of the survey, giving them time to "clean up." Also, hospitals often release only the favorable parts of a JCAH survey.

These criticisms are part of the reason the JCAH instituted a policy last year allowing the public a greater role in hospital accreditation. New rules provide that written requests for both the date of an upcoming JCAH survey and the past accreditation survey of a particular hospital will be honored. Consumers with specific complaints may now be present at a Public Information Interview with JCAH and hospital officials before the survey, and their complaints will be considered during the survey. The public is still barred, however, from accompanying officials on the survey or hearing the results without permission from the hospital.

A new law passed by Congress about a year ago gives even greater potential power to consumers with complaints about a hospital. The Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare may now institute separate accreditation surveys in response to substantial numbers of complaints. He may also authorize the state certification agency to conduct yet another survey or elicit results of a JCAH hospital survey, on the basis of consumer complaints. Thus, as a result of consumer action, the HEW Secretary may refuse Medicare coverage to any hospital, regardless of its JCAH accreditation status.