

Easy Way You Can Trigger a Federal Investigation of Your Local Hospital

...And Force It to Meet High Standards or Be Dropped From the

Dissatisfied with your local hospital? Is it inferior? Unsanitary? Badly run? Do the conditions threaten life?

You can do something about it. A little-known federal law sets strict standards for 7,000 hospitals across the U.S. participating in the Medicare program.

And if you don't think your hospital is up to snuff, you can trigger a federal investigation to force the hospital to upgrade itself or be dropped from the Medicare program.

Federal standards cover sanitary conditions, fire hazards, nursing staffs, patient room

Medicare Program

size and hospital operating procedures. If your complaint is valid, the inspection you instigate can even close down a bad hospital.

"This is a consumer tool designed for anyone with a legitimate complaint against a hospital," explained Stanley Rosenfeld, section chief of the Hospital Division at the Federal Bureau of Health Insurance in Baltimore. "We encourage consumers to take advantage of it."

Donald Rubin, president of the non-profit Consumer Commission on the Accreditation

of Health Services, has already used the law to close three substandard New York City hospitals.

"Anyone can spur an investigation by writing a simple letter to the nearest Federal Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare office, listing in detail the inadequacies or low standards which they have observed at a particular hospital," Rubin told The ENQUIRER. "Lack of cleanliness, poor nursing care or fire hazards are examples of specific inadequacies."

"HEW regional offices can easily be found in the phone book — or a call to the local Social Security office will also provide information about the location of an HEW regional office."

"You know the hospital doesn't have enough nurses if they can't find a nurse to feed your relative who can't feed himself," he continued.

"To find out if the hospital is a fire hazard, check with your state bureau of health. They have records which can give you the answers."

"Roaches in hallways and grime on eating facilities are sure signs of poor sanitary conditions."

"Inferior record-keeping is another area to keep an eye on — especially when a bureaucratic bungle causes records to disappear for long periods of time."

Sample standards listed in federal hospital legislation require:

- At least 100 square feet of floor space per bed in private rooms, and at least 80 square feet in multiple patient rooms — in the absence of local and state laws that specify otherwise.

- Corridors and passageways be free of obstacles.

- Regular inspection of air intake sources.

The guidelines also mandate, among other things, that kitchen facilities meet federal standards; that the hospital have an adequate nursing department (a licensed professional nurse must be on duty at all times, and professional nursing services must be available for all patients at all times); that equipment and work areas are clean and orderly; and that there's a system of identification and filing to insure the prompt location of a patient's medical record.

— DAN SCHWARTZ