

## CONSUMER NOTES

# Surveys Uncover Hospital Hazards

By FRANCES CERRA

When people check into a hospital for surgery or other treatment that carries risk, they generally assume that the hospital is equipped and staffed so that the inherent dangers of the surgical procedures are not compounded.

But random surveys of accredited hospitals ordered by the Federal Government from January 1974 through October 1975 showed that 64 percent of the hospitals inspected failed to meet one or more of the Federal standards.

These standards, among other things, concern the cleanliness of a hospital, its protection against fire and explosion, the adequacy of its nursing staff and equipment and its record-keeping.

Accreditation by the Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Hospitals, an independent, nongovernmental organization, is supposed to mean that these standards are met. Indeed, the Federal legislation that established Medicare makes accreditation the basis for Medicare eligibility, and under that law, no regular, periodic inspections of a hospital are necessary as long as a hospital is accredited.

However, doubts about the completeness of accreditation surveys led the Federal Government to order its own random surveys. According

to Donald Rubin, president of the Consumer Commission on the Accreditation of Health Services, the 64 percent failure rate shows that consumers must act themselves to force improvement of hospital conditions.

### 261 Hospitals Checked

The random surveys have, so far, covered only 261 hospitals nationwide, and the Federal agencies involved have temporarily suspended further surveys while they consider the implications of their findings.

How can a consumer force a hospital to improve conditions? By taking advantage, Mr. Rubin points out, of a procedure that results in a Federal inspection of a hospital. If that inspection finds violations that the hospital cannot or will not correct, the hospital can lose its Medicare and Medicaid eligibility. Without these funds, hospitals today cannot operate.

The procedure is simple. A consumer who has evidence that a hospital is not meeting proper standards directs a complaint to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Social Security Administration, Bureau of Health Insurance at 26 Federal Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10007, and requests that an inspection survey of the hospital be conducted.

The evidence could be a condition that the person has seen himself, possibly an inadequate nursing staff, or dirty or crowded conditions. This agency has no jurisdiction over physicians, and complaints about doctors should not be directed to it.

Another piece of evidence that could be used is a copy of the New York State Health Department's Article 28 inspection report on a hospital. The Health Department is supposed to make these inspections regularly as the basis for issuing operating certificates to hospitals. However, spokesmen for the department admit that inspections are backlogged, particularly for proprietary, or profit-making hospitals.

However, if an Article 28 inspection has been done recently, the report makes good evidence for the Federal Government. So far, three hospitals in New York City that were the target of complaints filed by Mr. Rubin based on the Article 28 reports have lost their Medicare eligibility.

In New York City, these records can be obtained from the State Health Department's Office of New York City Affairs at 2 World Trade Center. Outside the city they can be obtained from the local health department office.

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