

Shortage of government-run ambulances at hospitals has for long left the field open for the private sector to charge higher service rates. And now as the major hospitals in the city are declared off limits to the private operators, the question is how do the authorities plan to make up for the shortage

Photo

By Asim Mateen

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service

All major hospitals in the city have banned the entry of private ambulances in their premises. The private ambulance services, it is said, were looting the helpless and poor citizens by charging huge fares for transportation. The hospital staff who were accused of fleecing the patients in connivance with the ambulance owners are also being investigated by the city hospital authorities.

"We have strictly ordered that no private ambulance be allowed to be parked within hospital premises, except for Edhi ambulances. As far as the staff's involvement in the business is concerned, we are investigating it and those found guilty will be taken to task," said Dr Azhar Masood Bhatti, Deputy Superintendent Mayo Hospital.

It is alleged that staff members at some of the hospitals have been working on commission basis for private ambulance owners. This has proved so profitable that some of these hospital staffers now reportedly operate their own ambulances. It is also said that finding proof of such activities on their part will be very difficult, since the potential witnesses are again staff members. They would either be themselves involved in the racket or wouldn't want to speak against their colleagues.

The action against ambulance services has been taken on the directive of the Punjab health minister. Earlier, besides Edhi and hospitals' own ambulances, rows of private ambulances would be parked in front of the emergency wards. Most of the private ambulances belong to the owners of the medicine shops

in front of all major city hospitals.

They were so well organised that every morning they had in hand fresh lists of patients admitted to different wards. The list would be procured with the help of the nursing and paramedical staff who were promised 15 to 20 per cent commission for providing information in time, it is said. Beside their links with the staff, the drivers of private ambulance services made rounds the wards, so that they

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Private ambulances waiting for patients outside a government hospital.

could readily offer their services to people in need.

According to a survey, Edhi Foundation and hospital ambulances charge up to Rs. 7 or 8 per kilometer for offering ambulance services within the city. The private ambulances, which now have to operate from outside the hospital premises, charge at the rate of Rs. 12 to 15 per kilometer for both intra and inter city services.

A majority of the people have to rely on private ambulances because hospital ambu-

lances usually provide ward to ward services, within the hospital premises or sometimes transport patients to other hospitals within the city. Though only a limited number of Edhi ambulances, around eight, are available at every major hospital, these provide their services on nominal charges and sometimes provide free service in deserving cases.

Sadly, these limited ambulances are not enough to meet the requirements of so many patients. According to an aver-

age estimate the ambulances facilitate almost 150 to 200 people every day. In short, the ambulances provided by the government and Edhi Foundation are not enough to meet the needs of the patients at different city hospitals, so people have to rely on private ambulance services which are available at all times of the day.

This is the reason why even today private ambulances standing outside the hospitals premises are still running their businesses in full swing.



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comes with it own risks," continued. "There have been incidents where people have hired ambulances to far places, and refused payment on reaching the destination. And I can recall that on many occasions ambulances were snatched at gunpoint."

"It is just like the taxi business in which it is up to the people whether they want to hire the service or not. We don't force anyone," said another private ambulance

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Now the hospital staff do not provide them information about the critical patients directly but on telephone.

The private ambulance owners on the other hand justify their practices. One of them asks, "If people think that we are looting patients then why do they come to us. No doubt we charge more as compared to Edhi and hospital ambulance but they run on funds. They can sometimes transport patients free of cost because they can afford to. In our case it is not possible.

Nobody funds us. We are running this business on our own. Going places means incurring expenses like spending on petrol, salary of drivers and on any technical fault if one occurs."

"People bargain with us and we are ready to go for even Rs. 10 per kilometer," said the owner of a private ambulance. "It is not an illegal business and we are running it for the past 30 years. We charge a reasonable profit on our expenses."

"Moreover, the business

owner.

Given the situation as it exists, the question which comes to mind is, whether it is advisable to get rid of the private ambulances altogether. The fact is that there is shortage of ambulances in the government sector and the private services, even if these come at higher rates, do make up for this shortage. If the hospitals have their own ambulances according to the patients' requirement then no one will need to hire a private ambulance.