

MMA concerned by lack of regulatory enforcement on telehealth services

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PETALING JAYA: The Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) is concerned over a lack of regulatory enforcement in the telemedicine industry, saying it has become "over-commercialised" by corporations and third party administrators (TPA).

It also said there was a series of unregulated commercial-driven changes made by corporations and TPAs recently, such as a doctor providing instructions on the use of local anaesthesia "through non-clinical channels".

It also noted that an insurance company and a pharmacy group were offering round-the-clock telehealth services, including consultations and "instant" prescriptions via a mobile app.

The MMA said this "raises serious questions about who will be ensuring clinical accountability, continuity of care and adherence to professional standards.

"Some are even providing clinical directives or prescriptions through platforms that do not guarantee adequate assessment or follow-up.

"The concern is not with technology itself, but with the lack of regulatory enforcement and the growing commercialisation of clinical decisions," it said in a press statement on Thursday (Oct 9).

MMA said these recent events highlighted a core weakness of the Malaysian Medical Council's (MMC) ethical guidelines on telemedicine, where enforcement remains driven by complaints.

It said this means that unless a report is made, no action will be taken by the MMC.

MMA said this creates an environment where doctors may unknowingly or willingly compromise their duty of care due to corporate pressure.

To remedy this, the MMA said medical professionals should apply the same ethical and professional standards regardless if a consultation is face-to-face or online.

"Every diagnosis, prescription or medical decision carries legal and moral accountability.

"Convenience and cost savings can never justify cutting corners in patient care," it added.

MMA also expressed concern over recent actions by corporations and third-party administrators (TPAs) that interfere with medical judgment and patient care.

It said among the recent actions was a bank that issued directives mandating its TPA to use only generic drugs identified by their active ingredients for long-term medications of its employees.

"Such interference not only undermines clinical autonomy but also exposes patients to unnecessary risks.

"When business decisions start replacing medical judgment, the very foundation of our healthcare system is at risk," MMA said.

It called on the government to work on closing these regulatory loopholes around tele-consultation and corporate healthcare arrangements.

It suggested strengthening oversight mechanisms to protect patients, ensure transparency, and hold both doctors and any corporate organisation involved, accountable for breaches in ethics or safety.

"MMA supports innovation and digital transformation in healthcare, but technology must serve the patient, not profit.

"When patient welfare takes a back seat to commercial interests, the cost to society will be far greater than any savings claimed," it added.