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‘CEB, Water Board, private hospitals need mediation by ombudsmen’

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by Sanath Nanayakkare

Dr. Wickrama Weerasooria

There are some 200 private hospitals in Sri Lanka and they are not properly regulated, so it's time an ombudsman was appointed to represent the interests of the public by investigating and addressing their complaints through mediation, and the same should be done in terms of the interests of the public with the CEB and the Water Board, Insurance Ombudsman, Dr. Wickrama Weerasooria said in Colombo recently.

Dr. Weerasooria made this pertinent comment at the IPS auditorium, speaking at a forum held to mark World Consumer Rights Day.

"These ombudsmen can be officially appointed without causing any burden on public finances as funds from the relevant industries can be utilized to make their roles functional, he said.

"Customer is king in the global business scenario, but in Sri Lanka when a salesperson finds a customer seeking redress on a faulty product or poor service provided, the customer tends to become 'noda-king' (a person to be avoided). That is the widespread attitude here, he said.

Referring to various prices related to healthcare services provided by private hospitals, Dr. Weerasooria said, "For example, there's no way to know how much a simple urine test would cost a patient in the current pricing system. An ombudsman can play a vital role in bringing redress to consumer grievances."

Driving his point home Dr. Weerasooriya told the audience how he as Insurance Ombudsman got an insurance company to pay Rs. 6 million to a young female undergraduate whose father had died in a rail accident which had also rendered her mother a vegetable.

"This 17-year -old undergraduate came to me and said her mother needed Rs.50, 000 each month for her medication, and requested me to get something for them from the insurance company."

"As it had been found that her father had driven the car while the gate was being closed and had met with the accident because of his own lapse, the insurance company told me, 'Look, he caused his own death and made his wife suffer too', and then I said, 'That's true, but now the mother is alive and will live only for 2-3 years, so let's look at it in a humane way. Don't sue them or appoint a curator. I will go and talk to the judge in the chambers and get the necessary signatures.' In the end it worked. A judge couldn't have done that, but an ombudsman was able to. Such a decision would have taken five years in a court of law."

"All I have to say is, let's work under Section 30 of the Consumer Affairs Act. We don't need to change the law. Give the Consumer Affairs Authority wider powers and appoint eminent people to it that no one will question. Make it a commission appointed by a Constitutional Council. Same happens with the Police Commission, the Elections Commission etc. and there aren't any complaints against them based on bias. Thirdly, let's work towards an ombudsmen scheme, Dr. Weerasooria said.

He also suggested that the Consumer Affairs Authority should be renamed Trade Practices Commission.

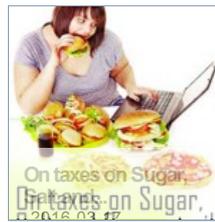
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