

A BRIEF LOOK AT ARBITRATION

Introduction

Arbitration is an alternative dispute resolution procedure that has been endorsed by such groups as the California Medical Association, and noted to be a favored method of resolving disputes by the United States Supreme Court.

If you are unfamiliar with arbitration in general the information included here provides some of the basic principles of arbitration.

What is Arbitration?

Arbitration is an alternative way of resolving disputes. Instead of taking your disagreement through the long and expensive process of court litigation, you and the doctor agree in advance to submit any disputes to an arbitrator for his or her determination. The arbitrator is selected from among the numerous retired judges who are available and qualified to serve on these matters, and is mutually agreed upon by both you and the doctor. After a hearing, which is usually less formal than a court proceeding, the arbitrator makes the decision ("award"). Although the procedures are different, generally the same laws and same measure of damages which apply in court proceedings also apply in arbitration.

Does arbitration prevent you from making a claim?

No. By selecting arbitration as the means to resolve a disagreement, all you are essentially doing is moving the claim to a different forum (i.e., from a jury to an arbitrator) to hear and ultimately decide your claim.

Does it prevent you from obtaining a financial award?

No. Arbitration does not restrict or prevent you from obtaining a financial award in any manner. If the arbitrator accepts and agrees with your claim he will determine a damage award.

The United States Supreme Court has, in fact, previously held that arbitration is strongly favored as an expeditious and economical alternative to the court system.

May I be represented by an attorney of my choice?

Yes. Any party to arbitration may be represented by an attorney of his or her choice, at his or her own expense. The arbitrator will hear the facts and decide the matter whether or not the parties are represented by lawyers.

Who is bound by this agreement?

If you choose to sign the arbitration agreement, you will be agreeing to bind yourself and anyone who could bring suit in connection with treatment or services provided to you by the doctor. If you sign on behalf of a family member or some other person for whom you have responsibility, you will bind that person as well as anyone who could sue in connection with treatment or services provided to that person by the doctor. Likewise, the doctor or anyone suing on behalf of the doctor, is bound.

What does arbitration cost?

In general, arbitration is less expensive than court actions. The arbitrator's fees are ordinarily shared equally by the parties. The amount of those fees will depend upon the complexity and length of the case.

If either party does not like the arbitration result, could there still be a jury trial in court?

Generally, the answer is "no." The whole purpose of arbitration is to avoid the expense, delay and inconvenience of going to court. Arbitration awards may be reviewed, and potentially reversed ("vacated") by a court in limited circumstances.

A Message to Our Patients About Arbitration

The attached contract is an arbitration agreement. By signing this agreement we are agreeing that any dispute arising out of the medical services you receive is to be resolved in binding arbitration rather than a suit in court. Lawsuits are something that no one anticipates and everyone hopes to avoid. We believe that the method of resolving disputes by arbitration is one of the fairest systems for both patients and physicians. Arbitration agreements between health care providers and their patients have long been recognized and approved by the courts.

By signing this agreement you are changing the place where your claim will be presented. You may still call witnesses and present evidence. Each party selects an arbitrator (party arbitrators), who then select a third, neutral arbitrator. These three arbitrators hear the case. This agreement generally helps to limit the legal costs for both patients and physicians. Further, both parties are spared some of the rigors of trial and the publicity that may accompany judicial proceedings.

Our goal, of course, is to provide medical care in such a way as to avoid any such dispute. We know that most problems begin with communication. Therefore, if you have any questions about your care, please ask us.

