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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, ABC Radio Perth, Drive, 2 August 2017

Subject: National Drug Strategy

BELINDA VARISCHETTI: What are your drinking habits? A glass or two after work; Friday drinks each week? Alcohol's really part of our conversation, just about daily sometimes. And we happily put heaps of photos of ourselves and our friends on Facebook; gatherings with friends having a range of drinks; out having fun; a celebration; a time to relax. But alcohol also damages our community and maybe there needs to be more of a focus on the harm that alcohol can do - that alcohol does do - rather than constantly highlighting the damage of things like methamphetamine for example. And that was really the point that was made earlier on ABC Radio today with Geoff Hutchison during an interview with Carol Daws from Cyrenian House. Now this place provides drug and alcohol treatment services and Geoff asked Carol if she thinks we're fixated with methamphetamine.

[Excerpt]

CAROL DAWS: *Oh, absolutely. The press loves ...*

GEOFF HUTCHISON: *Tell me why?*

CAROL DAWS: *You know, it makes good headlines. I'm not suggesting that there isn't in any way, shape or form suggesting that there isn't an issue with meth. I'm suggesting there are bigger issues out there around alcohol use, around domestic violence, around all sorts of related issues that come with alcohol. I think we as a society protect alcohol very much so. I don't think there's any doubt that alcohol produces more harm in society than any drug we've ever had by a long shot. There's no comparison. Having said that, meth creates quite dramatic sort of problems and certainly causes a huge amount of angst for families - notwithstanding that, so does alcohol. Certainly, in terms of treatment, we are definitely seeing increased numbers of people with meth presenting. In fact in our non-residential services methamphetamine would be the highest presentation of drug use.*

[End of excerpt]

BELINDA VARISCHETTI: Carol Daws from Cyrenian House. Well Dr Michael Gannon is the Federal President of the Australian Medical Association. Michael, is Carol Daws right?

MICHAEL GANNON: She's right in many ways. I think it's an uncomfortable realisation for many Australians to reflect on their own drinking and how ingrained it is in our culture. So in our own addiction policy - which we released today by coincidence - we've welcomed the discussion on methamphetamine, recognising the scourge that is in our community. But pointing to the failure of national drug strategy that we're not talking about the legal drugs that cause even more carnage.

BELINDA VARISCHETTI: So this is the Federal Government releasing its new drug policy blueprint. What's your real concern within that?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well there's a glaring omission when it comes to an alcohol policy and there is an opportunity in something as grand as a 10-year strategy to look at policy levers that government can pull to make the community safer. So that means if there is evidence elsewhere in the world that volumetric taxation of alcohol reduces harm, if that means that we do need to look at licensing and the way State and local governments look at that, it means that if we do need to invest more in public health education programs, if we need to look at any of

those measures, they all belong in the 10-year strategy, which focuses a bit too much on a drug that blessedly is only being used by just over one per cent of the community.

BELINDA VARISCETTI: Why is it that we hear so much about the damage caused by meth users in our communities - maybe because as Carol pointed out it's dramatic I guess and it captures the headlines and we hear about this through the emergency departments in hospitals, et cetera. Why is it that alcohol goes under the radar more often than not?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I don't think we need to underestimate the cancer in our society that methamphetamine causes. In our home town, in our home State, methamphetamine use is higher than any other jurisdiction in Australia. That's nothing to be celebrated. In many regional towns around Western Australia and in Perth it's destroying lives, it's destroying communities, it's destroying families. But we can acknowledge that and at the same time reflect on the carnage that legal drugs still cause. Twelve per cent of Australians are still smoking. It's the only habit that kills over half of its regular users and certainly impairs the health of the remainder. And alcohol, it's a difficult conversation. So many of us enjoy a drink. Not many of us would think that we are problem drinkers. But if you look at how deeply inculcated in our society drinking alcohol is, you start to get an idea about the potential harm it causes.

BELINDA VARISCETTI: So the problem could be partly that alcohol is so widely socially acceptable- accepted?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think it is. I think that most smokers, if they have children, have them come home from school telling them that they shouldn't be smoking. Most smokers, sadly, are nicotine addicts, they've fallen victim to the highly addictive poisons that the tobacco companies have developed over 100 years. Not many people think that it's a great idea to be mainlining ice. Whereas most problem drinkers don't know they've got a problem. And because a majority of us have a drink, the majority of us enjoy a drink, we probably don't take the time to reflect on the contribution that it causes and certainly, as Australia's peak health body, we're here to talk about both the acute harms and the long term harms of alcohol use.

BELINDA VARISCETTI: These safe drinking limits have been set for some time now, Dr Gannon, are you talking about the damage of binge drinking or is it more than that?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think we need to look at both elements. So you make the important point about binge drinking and the risks of- the acute risks of alcohol consumption. So whether that's the increased incidence of motor vehicle accidents, pedestrian accidents, whether it's family violence, whether it's violence on the streets, alcohol has that harm. And if you do exceed the safe drinking limits, more than two standard drinks a day for a woman or more than four standard drinks a day for a man, you start to get into the territory of chronic disease. An increased incidence of cancers including but not limited to breast cancer, bowel cancer, stomach cancer, oesophageal cancer, increased rates of different types of dementia, increased rates of high blood pressure, heart disease, liver disease. These are all to do with alcohol. And not for one minute do I stand here as chief wowser saying that we're calling for an end to alcohol. But it is time to question the relationship Australians have with alcohol and many of your listeners who travel extensively overseas will reflect the fact that there are many other developed countries that seem to have a slightly more temperate attitude to alcohol consumption.

BELINDA VARISCETTI: Dr Gannon, thanks for being part of the conversation this afternoon. Good to talk to you.

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