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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, ABC Radio Melbourne, Breakfast, 2 August 2017

Subject: National Drug Strategy

LIBBI GORR: Now, I read this morning on one of the less reputable news websites about how the Queen has at least four drinks a day, which according to this day and age would classify her as a binge drinker. I'm only saying what I read. And this is interesting because it's reflected in a proper article that we've had come across our desk. The Australian Medical Association says that the recently released National Drug Strategy - which kind of sets out a whole official approach to preventing and minimising drug harm over the next 10 years - focuses too much on Ice and methamphetamine, and not enough on alcohol.

Dr Michael Gannon is the Federal President of the AMA. He joins you on the radio. Good morning, Michael.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning, Libbi. How are you?

LIBBI GORR: I'm interested to know that four cocktails a day would put you in the realm of being a binge drinker, that's talking about HM- you know, HRH Elizabeth. But it's not that uncommon, is it? That amount of drink?

MICHAEL GANNON: No, it's all too uncommon. So, the safe drinking limits have been set for some time. And they probably reflect the harms in terms of chronic disease from heavy drinking. So, anything more than two standard drinks for a female would be regarded as heavy drinking that's bad for your health. Binge drinking probably refers to a number of drinks in one session that's more likely to give you any kind of acute problem. But they're the two dimensions to the problem our society has with alcohol.

LIBBI GORR: And now we're going to make news in a whole way that wasn't intended because it will say that the president of the AMA says that the Queen's drinking habit is bad for her health [laughs]. And really you're here to talk about the attention that goes on to other drugs, like Ice and meth. Do you think that our weightedness for concern doesn't take into account this every day danger?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, we can walk and chew gum at the same time. We can recognise that we have a huge problem in our country with illicit drugs. And probably the individual chemicalation [sic] that's causing the greatest carnage in our communities, in our emergency departments, in our hospitals, is methamphetamine. But although a great majority of Australians can enjoy a drink in a safe kind of way, the truth is that plenty of Australians are problem drinkers both taking on the chronic risks of the contribution to heart disease, to liver disease, a number of cancers, and then the acute risks which come with higher rates of domestic violence, of motor vehicle accidents, pedestrian accidents, other accidents. We've got a problem with alcohol as well, and we need to acknowledge it.

LIBBI GORR: So, if you could use a word to describe the Federal Government's new drug policy blueprint, what would it be?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, it's inadequate, and certainly the resources available in the community for GPs, for other specialists, for allied health professionals, is inadequate. When we identify someone that has a problem with alcohol, with methamphetamine, with other drugs, simply the resources available for GPs, psychologists, other specialists, are insufficient to help get enough people better, leading healthy and productive lives.

LIBBI GORR: The crazy thing about alcohol is it's just so socially acceptable.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think that there are many Australians who can enjoy alcohol safely. And we need to remember that as well. Now, it also needs to be said that there's a substantial minority of Australians who think that they drink safely, but don't. We've seen good cultural change in the last generation. Younger Australians wouldn't- well only a very small proportion of them would dream of getting behind the wheel of a car, after having had a few drinks. Whereas that was common place, both in our- in rural, regional and in metropolitan areas, up until a generation or so ago. So, these are cultures that need to change over a period of time. This is not to demean the carnage that methamphetamine use is causing in our community. But it's no exaggeration to say that overall that alcohol is a bigger problem for our society.

LIBBI GORR: So, you're releasing a paper today where you will write that down fair and clear.

MICHAEL GANNON: Absolutely. And this is part of our advocacy to Government on a whole range of public health issues. We need a national alcohol strategy. And these programs inevitably should include public education programs. But just as importantly, they need to include the resources where people are identified as having a problem, how do we get them access to evidence based drug therapy, how do we get them access to addiction medicine specialists, to psychologists, to other programs, to get them healthy again.

LIBBI GORR: And people have sought escape ever since the betel nut. There must be other issues that drive people to alcohol, it's not just drink it, is it? It's the causes that lead you to it.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think there's a greater recognition of the problems underlying this. And I'll leave this to the expert neuroscientists to talk about the reward centre deep in our brains. But there's no question that there are - as I think we've always known - there are some people who are more prone to addictions. And whether that's gambling addiction, whether that's the use of both legal and illegal drugs, there are some people who are more prone to that. And there are increasingly evidence based ways that we can help these people. That needs to be appropriately resourced.

LIBBI GORR: Dr Michael Gannon, National President of the AMA. They are releasing a paper today that talks back, I guess, to the State and Federal Governments with the new drug policy blueprint. Asking for more attention to be paid just to everyday dangers, like alcohol and what makes people turn to it for solace.

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