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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, ABC Radio Perth, Breakfast, Monday 3 July 2017

Subjects: Discrimination against female doctors

PETER BELL: What's appropriate for an employer to ask a prospective employee at a job interview? Obviously questions about work history and skills are essential, but can the questions turn personal? I'm asking because the AMA – the Australian Medical Association – says some public hospitals are asking female doctors in job interviews whether they intend to have children. The New South Wales AMA has received the reports from female doctors and is calling for action against it.

Michael Gannon is the AMA President. Good morning Michael.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning Peter. How are you?

PETER BELL: What's your view? Are hospitals entitled to ask a doctor about their future family plans?

MICHAEL GANNON: No, quite simply they're not. It's the wrong thing to do; it's against the law. Falling pregnant is a completely normal thing to do, it's part of female physiology, and the jurisdictions who run public hospitals, those private hospitals who employ people, are simply not allowed to ask these questions.

PETER BELL: How did the AMA hear about this, and what is actually going on in some of these hospitals in New South Wales?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, this is not new, and it's happening here in Western Australia and it's happening nationwide, and it's often happened. And sadly, I have to say as well, it's not just the hospitals; these kind of questions get asked by the learned Colleges in their interviews for specialist training as well. Now, some of them have modernised; they've got very set questions that get asked in the interviews now to try to avoid any allegations of any form of discrimination. But sadly, from time to time we still hear these questions come out. Sometimes the discrimination against women is overt, sometimes it's a bit more covert.

PETER BELL: Is the medical industry a little bit behind other industries and sectors in this regard, as far as discrimination is concerned, Michael?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, it might be. I'd hope we'd be in front. The reality is that more than 50 per cent of medical students nationwide are female, more than 50 per cent of junior doctors are female, and when it comes to applications for training positions it's closer to 50-50. So we need to change, we need to get better. The College of Surgeons had some very negative publicity a handful of years ago about training issues; they're working desperately hard to modernise and to encourage women to apply for certain disciplines, but I think we've still got a long way to go.

PETER BELL: This is a very broad question: Do you think that some doctors, because of the career paths and the way that it all works, feel like they can't have babies before their training is finished?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, that's certainly the case, that the women will defer their family until they're either a long way through their training program or until it's actually finished, and that might not necessarily be the best time to have a baby, to wait until age 34, 35, 36. But a lot of women feel this pressure, and sadly these questions still get asked. They're not appropriate

and the AMA believes in a zero tolerance attitude to any form of bullying, any form of harassment, and this is just one example of it.

PETER BELL: Have you heard of penalties being handed down for these sorts of questions, or attitudes being asked or demonstrated?

MICHAEL GANNON: I'm certainly not aware of any employment law case or anything like that, and sadly I don't think you'd have to scratch the surface too deep to hear a story of a young woman saying that they've had stories like this. We've quite simply got to stamp it out. We need to recognise that not only are women a significant part of the medical workforce, they're now a majority of the medical workforce, and we want their talents available. A lot of them will fall pregnant at some stage, and quite simply any short gap in their ability to provide service that comes from maternity leave just needs to be built into the job description, just needs to be built into the training programs.

PETER BELL: Thanks Michael, appreciate it. Michael Gannon, AMA President.

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