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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, *5AA Mornings with Leon Byner*, Tuesday, 3 October 2017

Subject: Proposal to lift legal smoking age to 21

LEON BYNER: Well-known miner and philanthropist, Andrew Forrest – and by the way, he’s somewhere in the air at 30,000 feet across the middle of Australia, otherwise he would have been on – he is urging Federal, State, and Territory Health Ministers to back a plan to lift the age at which Australians can legally buy tobacco from 18 to 21. Now, this is a push of Mr Forrest to eliminate cancers that are - well, to a degree, reduce them, and he reckons that it would save you and me, the taxpayers of Australia, \$3.1 billion in health costs annually, but also it could possibly mean that some people who are smoking wouldn’t, or would give up.

Now let’s talk to the President of the AMA, the Federal President, Dr Michael Gannon. Michael, thanks for joining us today. Would you support this?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly, we’ve made positive noises about it. We don’t have a specific policy on raising the smoking age. We’d have a look at a variety of options, you know, is there any evidence for the age of 21? Should it be 25? One of my colleagues was suggesting, should we lift the smoking age to 92? That’s probably a better idea. But certainly, I would not want to do anything to discourage Mr Forrest, with his zeal and energy for what is a very positive health message. Tobacco remains the No.1 cause of preventable death and misery in our community.

LEON BYNER: Michael, can you paint a word picture for the people of this State where there will be patients you will see from time to time, and you look at their prognosis, and you know that, had they not been smokers, they’d still be here, or they would have a much more favourable lifestyle?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, the truth is that every doctor in clinical practice sees the harm and misery caused by tobacco, and it would be fair to say that the majority of it is in people who became addicted to substances well before we had the knowledge we have now. There is no excuse for not understanding the harms of tobacco now, so that’s why we should look at any measure that makes it even harder for someone in their teens to take up the habit.

But if you are a surgeon, you might see lung cancer. If you’re an oncologist, you’re obviously giving chemotherapy to people with cancer. GPs every day deal with people whose asthma is worse, who have emphysema related to cigarette smoke. And if you look at what I do for a living, I’m an obstetrician, you see a higher rate of stillbirth, you see a higher rate of a horrible, rare complication called placental abruption, which often claims the life of the baby, can seriously threaten the life of the mother, and more and more evidence of the intergenerational effects of being exposed to cigarette smoke inside the womb. Every doctor sees the misery and harm of smoking tobacco. We support any measure that shines a light on that harm.

LEON BYNER: So, are you happy with the status quo, that the legal age should be 18, and just do more to educate people? Mind you, I don’t know what else there is left. I mean, you see a cigarette packet, it’s got the skull and crossbones on it, it’s got all sorts of horrible pictures, they hide the packets and people still ask for them. So it seems that there are some for whom this kind of advertising just doesn’t work.

