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Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Chris Zappala, Triple J, *Hack with Tom Tilley*,
 Tuesday, 4 June 2019

Subject: Anti-vaccine movement

TOM TILLEY: We have a doctor in the studio with us. And if anything's concerned you - something you've read that made you sort of wonder where the truth lies - we do have this medical expert in the studio to talk it through with you. His name is Chris Zappala. Chris, thanks so much for joining us.

CHRIS ZAPPALA: My pleasure.

TOM TILLEY: Now really interested in your point of view on this as the [Vice] President of the Australian Medical Association. Does the anti-vaccine movement really worry you?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Look, it does worry me. I think it worries most doctors out there, because we know that vaccines work. As some of those listeners were ringing up and telling you, it's a very effective intervention. And I think it's really important that people have confidence that when they go and get their vaccine, that they're doing something helpful, not just for themselves - they're protecting themselves individually - but they're helping to protect the community. Because, remember, we need to get vaccination rates up to those critical mass levels so that these infectious organisms don't get a foothold and start to circulate. So, there's a collective need around vaccination as well. But you've given some really excellent examples in your introduction there which I think we need to reflect on from time to time.

TOM TILLEY: So, do you think the internet has played a role in really platforming these kind of ideas and arguments?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Look, absolutely it has. Because people can shout out opinions that unfortunately are sometimes ill-informed. And that can put people on the wrong path. I mean, that point that you made that autism might have been linked to the measles, mumps, rubella vaccine- I mean I can't tell you how many times that's been debunked since the 1990s when it was tentatively postulated. And there have been studies that have looked at millions of kids and found no link whatsoever. And so simply holding out that that is a reason not to vaccinate is absolute nonsense.

And the other thing that I hear when I - sometimes, I do unfortunately go onto the anti-vaxxer websites and so on and have a little look, and probably I shouldn't do that because it's a bit depressing - but the other thing they say is, you know, all the public health initiatives is what's made the difference. So, you know, clean water, good housing, good food and so on, and that vaccination's done nothing. And of course, those public health initiatives were very important, no question whatsoever. But vaccination has been important.

You mentioned polio in your introduction. I mean, if people just Google that, they'll see wards full of iron lungs for patients who were being treated for polio, and there are people still in their more elderly years now who are impaired from polio, and we don't see that anymore. We

don't see the current rates of meningitis in young kids that can lead to hearing impairment and neurological impairment. Obviously, smallpox is gone. There's a whole bunch of successes. And on the other side of the equation, as you're probably aware, there's a bit of a recrudescence of measles around the world in North America, UK, and a little bit in Australia as well. And that's just completely tragic because it's absolutely preventable.

TOM TILLEY: Emma's called in from an anti-vaxxer hotspot, Lennox Head. How are you doing?

CALLER EMMA: Yeah good. Thank you, how are you?

TOM TILLEY: Good. What's it like raising kids there?

CALLER EMMA: Look, I'm a parent and I strongly believe in immunisation. But obviously our shire is right next to Byron Shire, which is the highest rate of anti and non-immunised [indistinct] children. And look, my children have been immunised against everything, they're completely up to date, including whooping cough. And unfortunately, because our herd immunisation is so low within the area, my children have actually got whooping cough in the past because they don't have that herd immunity. So, it's quite frustrating really.

TOM TILLEY: So, do you have conversations about it? Is it coming up at the cafe? Are you ever arguing with people about vaccination?

CALLER EMMA: I know that it's very personal, and certainly I would never try to- I would certainly put my point across, but I know that you can't change somebody's mind a lot of the time; certainly, that's been my experience. I'm, as I said, very strongly pro-immunisation. But it does make it really hard for those parents who do immunise their children. And, you know, it's probably the kids that aren't immunised maybe aren't getting these diseases because of that herd immunity, even though it is quite low.

TOM TILLEY: Interesting, yeah, alright. Interesting to hear your experience there, Emma, as a parent on the Northern Rivers that does vaccinate in an area where there's a relatively high level of people that don't.

We have Dr Chris Zappala in the studio with us. He's the Vice President of the Australian Medical Association. Chris, you said so many of these concerns have been debunked over and over again by science, but yet people still believe them. What do you think is going on in the human mind? I know you also said that you don't like to go onto those websites even though you do. But it must give you an insight on why people want to hang onto this fear and then go searching on the internet for things that fuel it, that aren't necessarily credible.

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Yeah, it's a real worry, isn't it? And I think first and foremost, the source of advice for you as an individual and your family should be your general practitioner. So, if you're concerned about something and you've got a question, please, for goodness' sake, go and speak to a GP. And if you don't have a GP, you should have one, because you don't know what's around the corner for your health.

The other thing which I think we get a little bit tangled with is sometimes we're a little bit wary or we've heard stories, and then you get a bit of groupthink going and you hear something else and that reinforces that ill-informed view. And there's some strident, very strident, views on the internet which can mislead. For example, after you have a vaccination, we know that the point there is that you're priming the immune system so that you're building antibodies and cells and all that sort of stuff, so that the next time your body sees that organism, you can attack it straight away and can get rid of it. But the process of building that immunological machinery, those antibodies and so on, can actually make someone feel just a little bit off colour, maybe get a little bit of a fever, something like that. And so, it's actually the vaccine having an effect and getting that immunity that some people say: "Oh goodness me, I had a reaction to the vaccine." And that's not at all that, that's not the case. And then you know, you pop online and you have a look at things, and you go: "Oh my goodness, I've done something bad here." So, I think we've just got to make sure that the right information is out there.

And if something doesn't sound plausible, it's not making sense, then forget about it and go speak to your GP, and say: "hey listen, what should I be doing around vaccination?", because there's different recommendations if you're young; or old; if you've got immune dysfunction; if you've got a chronic respiratory illness, for example, and so on. And your GP can help with all that.

TOM TILLEY: Alright. You're listening to Doctor Chris Zappala from the Australian Medical Association. Do you feel like there is more that you need to do to fight back against the flow of information online?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: I think there is more that we can do. The GP should still, if possible, be our trusted source of information, but we probably do need to get better at reaching out into the community and using social media, and just putting pithy, truthful, honest statements there, and using real-life examples – and there are heaps of them – to actually help debunk some of those myths.

And the other thing I would just say quickly is that everyone needs to stay in their lane. So we'll worry about the medicine, and the actors and the chefs and everyone else, they can do what they do as well.

TOM TILLEY: Alright, Dr Chris, good point. Thanks for joining us. Someone agrees with you on the text line – "Celebrities aren't scientists. They need to stay in their lane."

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