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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, 3AW, Thursday, 06 February 2020

Subject: Hospital wait times in Victoria

NEIL MITCHELL: Dr Tony Bartone's on the line, Federal President of the Australian Medical Association. But also – and one of the reasons I want to talk to him – a GP working in the system.

Dr Bartone, good morning.

TONY BARTONE: Good morning, Neil.

NEIL MITCHELL: Well, you're a GP and on the job. How difficult is it to negotiate this system?

TONY BARTONE: Well Neil, unfortunately the stories of Tanya and Matt that you've just heard are very reflective of all the experiences day-in, day-out that we constantly face in our consulting rooms. Every day, patients that I've sent off for an appointment to be seen in outpatients, to be put on the list. And that's what's not shown in these figures, they're hidden away - the time before you get to your outpatient appointment - which is a significant amount as well in comparison to the actual wait time for the surgery.

So you send off the letter and you wait. And the patients, you have to manage them in the meantime - there's pain, there's loss of function, there's complications from the medications that you're using to manage their condition while they're waiting for their surgery.

NEIL MITCHELL: Is it so critical, is it serious enough that people could die waiting?

TONY BARTONE: Look, this is always the risk and, of course, when the system is being stretched further and further and further, that is potentially the likely consequence that might ensue. We have to be very clever and very adept at managing the conditions while they're waiting, but unfortunately if you stretch the system further and further, like we are, we have got to expect that things will go awry.

NEIL MITCHELL: But you must be, you must see a lot of suffering coming through your rooms in that case?

TONY BARTONE: Neil, my practice is made up particularly of a significant number of elderly and not so elderly people waiting for surgery of all types whether it's orthopaedic, whether it's abdominal, whether it's any of the other surgical specialties that might be required. And yes, they are people who are in pain or having to cope with limitation in function. And it's a significant impost on them, it's a significant impost on us in trying to manage and use our resources to have to sort of keep them in those conditions while they're waiting for that surgery.

NEIL MITCHELL: Before the last election, we were promised extra nurses - 1100 of them - extra ambos, extra paramedics, extra hospitals, new regional appointments, a whole lot of new appointments. Has any of that been delivered?

TONY BARTONE: Look, no doubt some of that has been delivered but what's actually being missed in this whole conversation is that we are growing as a population and we're living longer and we are dealing with more and more complex disease. That triple whammy is actually putting more pressure than what Governments have foreseen.

And yes, they are spending more but we need to spend even more. This is the paradox, this is the problem, this is what we've got to get ahead of the game and otherwise we'll be chasing our tails for many years to come.

NEIL MITCHELL: How much do we need then? I'm talking to the Minister later, how much does she need? How much extra?

TONY BARTONE: Look, clearly, at the moment, it's a conversation between both Federal and State. The Minister will tell you that because the cost of the funding is split between the two governments. And so, unfortunately, this will be another part of the conversation you'll have with the Minister, that they'll say they're not getting enough from Canberra, and vice-versa.

And this is why we've got to have a much better way of managing complex and chronic disease. We can't manage our way out of this by simply building more hospitals. We've got to get ahead of the game - prevent and manage more of this problem in the community before we need to get to expensive hospital treatment.

NEIL MITCHELL: Thank you very much for your time. Dr Tony Bartone, Federal President of the Australian Medical Association and a GP here in Victoria.

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