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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, Radio National, The World Today,
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Subjects: Vaccinations

ELEANOR HALL: Health experts are demanding that One Nation leader Pauline Hanson retract the advice she's giving parents about vaccinations for children. Miss Hanson says the Government's No Jab, No Pay policy is only fit for a dictatorship and has encouraged parents to do their own research into vaccinations. The Prime Minister is urging Australians to ignore the One Nation leader. The head of the Australian Medical Association says it's time Senator Hanson started behaving responsibly.

Michael Edwards has this report.

REPORTER: 50-year-old Nicky is a passionate advocate for children receiving vaccinations. Why? Her own daughter suffered whooping cough as a baby.

NICKY: I'm a very pro-vaccination person and I just don't understand the anti-vax argument. One of my daughters had whooping cough even though she was vaccinated. And so to have people say whooping cough's a good example, it kills babies, it's really important for the whole community to be vaccinated so that those babies are safe. So that's one example of why it's so important.

REPORTER: But now Pauline Hanson has reignited the debate about childhood vaccinations, using a Sunday television interview to question their safety while refusing to distance herself from previous remarks linking vaccines to autism. The One Nation leader's comments provoked swift condemnation, with the Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and the Opposition leader Bill Shorten both rejecting them. The Health Minister Greg Hunt also tweeted that vaccinations save lives. But despite that, Senator Hanson, who is now campaigning in WA for this week's state election, has defended her remarks.

PAULINE HANSON: I'm not telling people not to vaccinate their children, I'm telling people investigate it, just find out the information and just make sure that you have the right information. People have said that they that their children may be allergic to it. Have a test done.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: What is the test?

PAULINE HANSON: Apparently there is a test you can get done to see if the child is allergic to the vaccination or not.

REPORTER: Pauline Hanson also says she vaccinated her own children, but her foray into this debate has health groups concerned.

MICHAEL GANNON: I'm utterly appalled by Senator Hanson's comments.

REPORTER: Dr Michael Gannon is the President of the Australian Medical Association.

MICHAEL GANNON: She needs to realise that she's a serious player in Australian politics now. You know, with 8, 9, 10 per cent of Australians indicating an intention to vote for One Nation, she can no longer make fringe statements that are dangerous to the health of the whole community.

REPORTER: Just how big a problem is the anti-vax movement to public health in Australia?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, we know in medical science that we're never going to reach that 1 or 2 per cent of rusted-on flat earthers who don't accept the science of vaccination. But what we worry about a lot about is that about 8 per cent of the population are so-called vaccine-hesitant, and they're looking for any information that might lead them away from what is, with the exception of clean water, probably the most significant health measure we've got.

It is absolutely essential that we have accurate information, and this fatuous idea that parents can spend half an hour on Wikipedia and come to a greater understanding of the issues than their doctor and the accumulated wisdom of all the world's medical scientists is ludicrous.

REPORTER: And Nicole Rogerson, who's the head of Autism Awareness Australia, is demanding Pauline Hanson retract her comments.

NICOLE ROGERSON: It shows just an absolute lack of knowledge to do with anything to do with childhood vaccinations and autism. And I think she shouldn't comment on what she clearly doesn't understand.

REPORTER: You're the peak body representing autism, what do you know about the situation when it comes to vaccines and autism?

NICOLE ROGERSON: There is no link between vaccinations and autism and any suggestion has long been discredited. But it still persists out there. Very vulnerable parents hear stories like that and are reluctant to vaccinate their children. That's why I think Pauline Hanson is being so callous in her disregard for the medical community.

I'd also like to say that her suggestion that parents are better placed than Australia's scientific medical community to do their own research. And her comment that, you know, there is research out there that shows a link is absolutely false. It's terribly irresponsible for her to say so.

ELEANOR HALL: That's Nicole Rogerson from Autism Awareness Australia, ending that report from Michael Edwards.

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