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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, Sky News, 6 March 2017

Subjects: Vaccination; Lockout laws

TOM CONNELL: A press release this morning to do with vaccinations came from David Leyonhjelm, of course from the Liberal Democrats. This is an interesting one because he is often talking about small government, “government get out of people's lives”. He said, though, that in the Western Australian campaign he'll make immunisation a requirement to attend State school in Western Australia, no exemption will be allowed for conscientious objectors. Now he's not about to form government, he'd be very unlikely to have even the balance of power, but interesting that someone from such a small government perspective still thinks this is very much the right thing, make immunisations compulsory.

For more on this story that we've chatted about all morning and we're getting plenty of reaction from, I'm joined by Australian Medical Association President Michael Gannon.

Michael, thanks for your time this morning. If you can start by explaining - we've had a few viewers write in and say, “well, if vaccinations are good and they work, then people shouldn't be worried, you get your kid vaccinated and that's all you need to worry about”. Can you explain why it's important that everybody gets vaccinated?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, one of the reasons why comments like this are so concerning is that we know when it comes to childhood vaccination, nearly 10 per cent of parents are so-called vaccine-hesitant. They worry about vaccination and they can be swayed very easily by any message which might be seen to question the validity of the science.

Senator Hanson's a very important person in Australian politics now, nearly 10 per cent of Australians indicated an intention to vote for her party. She needs to be careful and responsible when she speaks.

TOM CONNELL: Why has this anti-vaccination line been something that's been so hard to kill off? Do you think it is just very much the fringes of society? Is it something that's increasing with - I mean, the internet these days, if you want something to reaffirm your opinion, you can find it out there.

MICHAEL GANNON: I can tell you that it is the lament of doctors and scientists across Australia that evidence-based treatments do get called into question. Now whether that's childhood vaccination, adult vaccination, other extremely important health measures like putting fluoride in tap water - they are the stuff of conspiracy theorists all the time. Because we don't see things like polio now, because most people haven't seen a child damaged by measles, we take it for granted as to the public health benefits of it.

Sadly, in 20 years' time, someone in my position might well be making the argument why meningitis vaccination is so important if we consign it to the history books. That's the truth of it. We don't see these problems and the population gets lazy.

SAMANTHA MAIDEN: Can we just ask about this test that Pauline Hanson's been referring to? What is she on about? I mean, is there some sort of test that parents can do - I

don't see why you'd do it, given that there's no evidence that they are unsafe - but what is she even talking about?

MICHAEL GANNON: There's no such test. And it's really important that we acknowledge that a minute number of people are seriously injured by vaccinations. I would love to see a no-fault compensation scheme for that minute number of people who are seriously injured by vaccines. Local reactions in the skin are common, low grade fevers are common, but on an individual basis vaccination is a good idea for an individual, and on a community level there is no question that the benefit that the community gains is of the order, vaccine by vaccine, of about 10,000-to-one in terms of the number of people that benefit for every person that's harmed. Now hospitals are no longer bulletproof ...

SAMANTHA MAIDEN: [Talks over] Are you saying if parents turn up and ask for this test, it doesn't exist? If parents listen to what she says and go into the GP tomorrow, there is no test?

MICHAEL GANNON: No, there is no test. But what we do have are mechanisms that very, very carefully and seriously look at vaccine safety. The safety of the vaccination program is in the interests of political leaders in our country, of scientists, of doctors and of the Australian population. And for us, from time to time, to have this flawed and really quite evil MMR autism study thrown back up at us is really disgraceful. The doctor that put together this fundamentally flawed study was deregistered by the GMC in Britain - last time I heard, they were making films and running a wellness clinic in Cuba. This has been entirely discredited.

Senator Hanson needs to recognise the power she has over many Australians and come and talk to the doctors, come and talk to the scientists about these essential, important issues.

CAROLINE MARCUS: Michael, I just want to ask you about the Government's No Jab, No Pay policy, that's what Pauline Hanson was attacking. How important is the policy in keeping children safe?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well the Government's to be congratulated on a policy that a lot of people said wouldn't work. We've known for a long time now that so many of the so-called rusted-on anti-vaxxers, their piety and their dedication to their views disappeared very quickly when it came to taking welfare payments away. What we also knew is that for most people, it's not that they reject the science behind vaccination, they don't reject the accepted wisdom, but they lead busy lives and what we've seen with No Jab, No Pay is that so many of those parents that didn't get around to vaccinating their children, when there was potentially a financial penalty, did so quickly.

Welfare is part of the greatness of this country. That we help lift up those less fortunate than ourselves, or help look after people who temporarily find themselves on hard times. But the other part of the deal is that you do your bit for the community, you protect those kids that can't be vaccinated for medical reasons, you protect those other kids that vaccines are less effective in. We have to all work together to embrace the public health measure that, behind clean water, is the most important of the whole lot.

CAROLINE MARCUS: And Doctor, I just wanted to ask you on your take on another- what many people consider to be a big public health issue. Another story in the headlines today are the lockdown laws and a new report that shows there has been a slight increase in surrounding suburbs, although a big decrease in the suburbs like Kings Cross which were most affected. What are your views on the lockdown laws? Should they be weakened in light of this report? Do you think that they need to remain as strong as they have been?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well what I would say on all these issues is let's look at the evidence and then see whether the Kings Cross experience, the Sydney experience can be rolled out across Australia. We know that the Kings Cross laws were based on laws in Newcastle and we've seen a significant reduction in alcohol-related harms there.

I think that all jurisdictions should have a serious look at these laws. They do not impair in any significant way for people to get a skinful, they're still pretty generous in letting people drink until very late in the morning, but there has been a clear reduction in the number of emergency department presentations due to alcohol-related violence. I think that other jurisdictions should look at the Sydney experience and see whether or not they can implement in their part of Australia.

GREG THOMPSON: And Michael, how do you react to the point that goes forward by business owners, particularly with pubs and clubs, who say it's damaging business, it's not good for jobs. Surely the health and wellbeing of Australian citizens and tourists come first before the bottom line, surely?

MICHAEL GANNON: If you actually look closely at the laws there's still plenty of opportunity for those pubs and clubs to make a living and there's still plenty of opportunity for people - if that's what they want to do - to have a real good go at getting a night of drinking in. Some would say the laws don't go far enough. We don't stand in the way of business making a living, it's important that our cities and towns are vibrant but there's plenty of ways of enjoying yourself and pull up stumps by about 3am I would have thought.

GREG THOMPSON: Well said.

TOM CONNELL: Thank you. Michael Gannon, from the AMA there.

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