

Australian Medical Association Limited

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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, RN *World Today*, 7 December 2016

Subjects: Autism Spectrum Disorder

ELEANOR HALL: The Australian Medical Association is warning today that Australian children with autism are not being diagnosed as quickly as they should be. That lag in recognising and treating the condition can seriously affect the child's development. Penny Timms has our report.

PENNY TIMMS: The Australian Medical Association has today released a position paper raising concerns about a lag in diagnosis for autism spectrum disorder. The AMA's President is Dr Michael Gannon, and he says in Australia children with autism are typically diagnosed just before their sixth birthday. But experts recommend that should happen around the age of two.

MICHAEL GANNON: Other countries seem to be doing better. And sadly, as is the story in so many other areas of the health care system in Australia, there are pockets that do very well but sometimes in outer metropolitan areas, in rural areas etc, there's just less access to the expertise to make the diagnosis, which sometimes involves referral to a child psychiatrist or to a paediatrician.

PENNY TIMMS: That lag means tens of thousands of children are missing out on vital early treatment.

MICHAEL GANNON: There's this concept of plasticity, where the interconnecting nerves of the brain continue to form as we develop. There's a great deal of evidence to show that if you make the diagnosis when it can be made, closer to the age of two or three, you're going to have a lot better outcomes than if you don't make the diagnosis until the age of five or six.

PENNY TIMMS: This year, it was revealed that there has been an unexpected increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism in Australia, prompting an overwhelming number of families to seek support through the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

MICHAEL GANNON: Certainly, there's some suggestion that the incidence might be increasing. One of the things in the statement is to call for greater research into a condition that really defies description in many ways. We're at a loss to explain exactly what the cause of it is.

PENNY TIMMS: Are GPs given a guideline on how to diagnose a child with autism?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly these guidelines exist but, like so many areas, it's extremely hard for GPs to access the specialist services, both if the diagnosis is obvious or if there's some question about the diagnosis. So this is another area of relatively basic, and to some extent preventable, health care where we should be making our investments.

PENNY TIMMS: The Australian Medical Association says it wants to see greater awareness of autism spectrum disorder, as well as more federal funding to help improve specialist services and training for doctors.

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