

Australian Medical Association Limited

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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, ABC News 24, 8 March 2017

Subject: Medical registration; vaccinations

KATHRYN ROBINSON: The New South Wales Health Department is defending recruitment practices after it emerged a man had been posing as a doctor for 11 years. Shyam Acharya is on the run from Australian Federal Police after being accused of stealing a doctor's name and qualifications in India before moving to Australia and becoming a citizen. He worked at Manly, Hornsby, Wyong, and Gosford hospitals from 2003 until 2014 under the name Sarang Chitale, with only one complaint ever registered. He faces a \$30,000 fine if convicted of breaching Australian health laws.

For more on this we are joined by the Australian Medical Association President, Michael Gannon, from Perth. Michael, good to see you today.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: What sort of responsibilities did this phoney doctor have?

MICHAEL GANNON: My understanding is that they were working as a junior doctor under supervision, but that gives me no comfort at all. It's absolutely incumbent on the Medical Board to check someone's qualifications, and it's absolutely incumbent on Area Health Services to do the appropriate checks to make sure that someone is who they say they are.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: This happened over 11 years, since the early 2000s. What sort of systems are in place since then to stop this from happening again?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly, it's the case that for doctors trained locally, the identity checks, it is a whole lot easier. It's a difficult job for the Medical Board and other authorities. There's literally thousands of medical schools around the world, and it's actually difficult to produce these checks. But it's absolutely essential that Australian patients are protected, and that they need to develop the appropriate mechanisms to vet the qualifications of doctors that arrive from other countries. It's been too easy for the public hospital system to fill vacancies with doctors coming from overseas. They need to make greater efforts to make sure that people say who they are.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: What sort of efforts are you suggesting should be happening that might not be? You say it's difficult to check overseas doctors coming here, but simply picking up a phone call would be a good start?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think that there are some allegations here that there might have been some form of identity theft. I know that the job of the Medical Board of Australia is actually very difficult, with literally tens of thousands of medical schools and specialist colleges around the world. So it is difficult, but that doesn't mean that they don't need to do their job. It's absolutely essential that any patient in any clinic or hospital or any healthcare setting in Australia today can take comfort from the fact that a doctor looking after them has been appropriately trained.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: How confident are you that there aren't other phoney doctors masquerading around as legitimate doctors in Australian hospitals currently?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think this would be exceedingly rare. That's what makes it newsworthy. I would hope there are no other such cases, but it is absolutely essential the Medical Board, the registration authority, takes this work very seriously. We want Australian patients to enjoy the same standard of health care from international medical graduates that they do from our home-trained workforce. That is overwhelmingly the case.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Can I turn our attention, finally, to vaccinations and reports in the media today? How concerning is it that one in three - there are some statistics out about children being vaccinated and parents' reluctance, in this day and age, to get them vaccinated because of alleged links or their perceived ideas that it is linked to autism?

MICHAEL GANNON: The most recent study shows that 6 per cent of parents vaccinate their children, despite [the parent having] serious concerns about the safety of vaccination, and it's another 6 or 7 per cent of parents that don't vaccinate their children at all. The false claims, the mistruths, the lies that you can find on the internet are of a great concern to doctors.

The national immunisation program is a triumph. There is good news in this story - 93 per cent of one-year-olds in Australia are fully vaccinated, 93 per cent of five-year-olds are fully vaccinated. But we know that a lot of parents are doing this with some reservations, and that's of great concern. The person to give you the most accurate information about the benefits of vaccination to allay your concerns is your local immunisation provider. In many cases, that's your family GP.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: But where would you say that we are failing, if the statistics are correct in these reports, saying almost one-third of parents remain uncertain about the effects of vaccines and their children?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think that just goes to show how powerful the mistruths and the lies that are available, largely on the internet, are. It's so important we teach our children how to discern the wheat from the chaff when it comes to information on the internet. It is so important that we focus more closely on increasing health literacy in schools, and in adult education. I can assure you that there is some absolutely galling rubbish available to parents on the internet. They need to be taught how to find credible sources of information. Anything which weakens this most important of public health measures really needs to be stepped on.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: AMA President, Michael Gannon, many thanks for joining us today.

MICHAEL GANNON: Pleasure.

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