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Transcript: Interview with AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, ABC 720 Perth Mornings, 8 June 2016
Subjects: Regular Segment: Who Are You?

JAMIE BURNETT: Today on Who Are You? - a man who's heard a baby's first cry nearly 4000 times, he holds one of the country's most influential positions in health and medicine as President of the Australian Medical Association. But, well before that, he was just a boy in Dianella, he loved his footy, loved his cricket like most of us and, who for nine magical nights, cameoed as a TV game show champion. Michael Gannon, good morning.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning Jamie, how are you?

JAMIE BURNETT: Yeah, I'm well. Who are you?

MICHAEL GANNON: Who am I? Well, my main job is I'm an obstetrician and gynaecologist in Perth, I'm a father of two lovely healthy children and I'm someone who's intensely proud of being a Western Australian, love living in the city that I grew up in.

JAMIE BURNETT: Yeah and you grew up in Dianella. Was it a happy childhood?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, I had a lovely childhood, perhaps never had to worry about anything, very comfortable, never wanted for anything. It was a wonderful time to grow up, it made me comfortable in my own skin. It was a great time and a great place to grow up.

JAMIE BURNETT: Tell me about mum and dad.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, mum and dad are still healthy and well, still live in Dianella. My dad's an accountant, they met at the MLC on St George's Terrace in the 60s and as it was back then, not universally, but mum didn't go back to work after her eldest son was born and looked after the three of us, and did a great job raising us, I think.

JAMIE BURNETT: Yeah not a story too uncommon. I understand as well, with your family history, there's a little bit of that as you walk through London Court in the city.

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, my grandfather was a carpenter with Plunketts and that was one of the stories we're always told - whenever you're walking through the mall, look up and look at the fantastic woodwork there. He worked hard like so many working people of his time. It's interesting to reflect on how things have changed. I've seen all the photos of him going to work in a suit and a hat as a working man. Times have definitely changed.

JAMIE BURNETT: Yeah times with tools and ties which are a little different.

MICHAEL GANNON: Definitely, I think things have changed a lot. I won a prize in Year Eight in woodwork and I thought I might have had some sort of chance of following in his footsteps, but that was the end of my skillset.

JAMIE BURNETT: [Laughs] You've inherited some. If we go further back as well, your great-great-grandfather, I understand, was one of the first to uphold the law in Mundaring.

MICHAEL GANNON: My great-grandfather was the first policeman in Mundaring when they were building the weir and that's where my grandfather grew up. There's a street named after the family in Mundaring and again, that's a story that the kids get told when we make our, perhaps, annual pilgrimage up there to enjoy a bit of winter sunshine.

JAMIE BURNETT: I like that. There's a few spots around the city and broader Perth where you can reminisce on some family history. Michael Gannon, as I mentioned, you grew up in Dianella, you go to North Morley Primary School, you later moved to Guildford Grammar. But I understand when you were a kid, and not an uncommon story, it was a cricket bat and a ball that was never too far away.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I was fortunate enough to grow up opposite a park and yeah, for six months of the year it was come home, have a sandwich and grab a cricket bat and a tennis ball, and for six months of the year it was come home, grab the footy, go across the road with one of my brothers, or both of them, or the other kids who lived around the streets.

JAMIE BURNETT: You've got a couple of brothers, how competitive did those cricket or footy matches at the park across the road get?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, there were plenty of competitive basketball games as they got older, and I watched my two brothers grow up a long way past me. But it was more the competition with the other kids in the street. Mum and Dad built the third house in the street, there were lots of other young families who lived there, so we had an automatic gang who was out across in the park playing sport, keeping healthy in the beautiful Perth sunshine.

JAMIE BURNETT: No better way to sharpen the skills on the sporting field, it would have been pretty fierce.

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, it was sometimes. I remember one visit to the GP where I copped a cricket bat in the side of the face and was bleeding from the eye socket, that wasn't too flash for my mum, I'm sure. But no, we learnt the power of competition. I always get amused by the stories of sledging - the sledging that goes on on cricket fields goes on in backyards around Australia every day.

JAMIE BURNETT: You probably can't repeat some of it right now as well. You mentioned the GP, I think that's interesting because it was a happy childhood as you were discussing, but for you it wasn't always a healthy one. What health problems did you have as a young kid?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I've been told off by my mother for overstating these in the past, but the truth is I did spend a lot of time at the GP, and that is very much what inspired me to do medicine at a young age. I know it's been with me since at least I was four or five years old.

I had a major operation at Princess Margaret Hospital in the days leading up to my first birthday - just a litany of fairly minor, ear, nose and throat problems. But I was always impressed by the care and compassion of my GP Ian Matthews, a wonderful man in many ways, the inspiration behind me deciding to become a doctor.

JAMIE BURNETT: So, that's where the passion really first started for you with medicine and health?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think so, yeah. I remember promising my grade one teacher that she'd be my first patient. It didn't happen, but it is something that has been with me a long time, a dream that I eventually fulfilled.

JAMIE BURNETT: Was it frustrating as a kid? You mentioned that at times they may have been minor ailments but they were regular, was it a frustration to be that kid that was at the GP's office fairly often?

MICHAEL GANNON: I don't think we ever know any different when we're living our lives. Perhaps that just seemed normal to me. I wouldn't want to overstate it, but it's an important part of my story as to why I wanted to be a doctor so much.

JAMIE BURNETT: Okay, I mentioned Guildford Grammar a little earlier. It is one of those places where kids really come from all over the State to study, there's kids from Perth, all different areas and there's those who come to board as well. Did you find yourself - at Guildford Grammar - mates with many of the country kids who had come to study?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, when I was at Guildford, it was by some distance the biggest boarding school in Western Australia, and about a third of the school were boarders. And most of my best friends at school were farmers, or certainly from the bush. I think of my best mates from places like Dandaragan and Williams and Busselton. That was an important part of my school holidays, going and visiting wheat and sheep and lupin farms. I've got a close connection with the bush; my grandmother is from Dowerin. I'm always happy when I'm out in the bush.

JAMIE BURNETT: Yeah, so as - in a way, you're making mates and maybe finding some free holidays as well.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, it's fantastic, and that was a great part of the school. The boarders used to love to come to the so-called daybugs' houses for weekenders during term and we got our own back in school holidays and got to do things you wouldn't otherwise do. You know - go shooting, ride motorbikes, get up to all sorts of mischief. It was great fun.

JAMIE BURNETT: I know you had that, I suppose, involvement with the rural community with your family, but as a city kid, that interaction with children from all around the State, and being able to head to these properties, did that give you a different perspective, that type of interaction, do you think?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think that in some ways we've seen a loss of the contract, if you like, between rural Australia and the cities. That's where the wealth is generated – it's generated in big mines and in agriculture and other areas like that. There's a lot of us in the city who live very comfortable lives based on the sometimes back-breaking work of our cousins in the country. I would like to see that reconnection happen. One of my passions in the AMA presidency is to try and overcome the inequity between access to health services between the bush and the city.

JAMIE BURNETT: You talked about Dandaragan. Your best mate in school, I understand, had a family farm in Dandaragan, and I understand as well that, long before you were delivering babies, you were helping out with some lambs on that particular farm as well.

MICHAEL GANNON: Gaden Rose still takes credit for my obstetric career, for teaching me how to get stillborn lambs out of ewes. The ewe will die if you don't deliver the lamb. That was certainly my first exposure to the imperfections of animal labour - maybe he's entitled to some of the credit for my obstetric career.

JAMIE BURNETT: Now in high school it's pretty obvious that you're a bright student, you make the State debating team, competing in the national championships against England - it was debating, not cricket. But in a year - well in year 12, it was really applying your smarts to this that perhaps gained you the most attention. Have a listen.

[Excerpt]
PETE SMITH: Tonight we're offering a $9000 inflatable sports boat, a $20,000 range of imported furniture, two outstanding Holden cars, plus the cash jackpot of $140,000 - all on the world's richest quiz, Sale of the Century.
[End of excerpt]

JAMIE BURNETT: Now who could forget that intro. How did you end up on a TV game show, Sale of the Century?

MICHAEL GANNON: Ah look, we actually had an inter-school quiz competition, so that wasn't completely foreign to me, this idea, and your listeners will remember just exactly how popular that TV show was. But 40 schools, independent, Catholic and government, were invited to send three students each to an audition up at Channel Nine, and there was a whole afternoon of auditions, and they chose three of us to go to Melbourne and appear on TV.

JAMIE BURNETT: How'd you go?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I went fairly well. I didn't win the lot. I was one of four who made the best of seven final, and I won the first final, so I was in front. Going into the seventh final, there were three of us who'd won two each, so it was all on the line on the last night. But I came up short to someone who I still talk to from time to time, a lovely lady called Jane Harding, who also did medicine and is now a breast surgeon in Melbourne.

JAMIE BURNETT: That's nice, almost keeping it in the family. You didn't win, but you know someone else from the fraternity did.

MICHAEL GANNON: She was a very talented young girl and has used those talents, she's moved from Hobart to Melbourne, and yeah, it's great to keep in touch with her from time to time.

JAMIE BURNETT: Okay, so a Sale of the Century - well, we'll call you a Master for this, I think. But let's move to medicine, Michael Gannon. It's what you studied at the University of Western Australia. Going back then, what was life like for a medical student?

MICHAEL GANNON: Oh, university is great fun. There's plenty of time for mischief. There's an old saying, what do you call the person who comes last in their year in medical school? Doctor.

Perhaps there wasn't the same level of competition that there is now. It's a great part of the culture of medicine that there is a lot of cooperation and camaraderie. It's perhaps not as competitive as you have to be in some other fields to get the best jobs, but that's important. That's even part of the ethical code of medicine, to treat your fellow doctors as your sisters and your brothers. Part of that's at medical school, helping each other through what can be a very difficult course.

JAMIE BURNETT: Yeah, it is a difficult course, and I understand as well that you spent time living at King Edward Hospital when you were a medical student?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, well, I suppose you're piecing together how I ended up doing obstetrics, but that was by far and away the most exciting term as a medical student. We lived, ten or twelve of us at a time, in Agnes Walsh House on site at King Edwards, and it was fantastic learning, because we learned by immersion. The people who had been on the labour ward or had been on theatre would come back and tell their stories. One of my laments about modern medical education is that there's not those same opportunities. We're now graduating

three, maybe four times as many medical students, many of whom never get to deliver a baby. For me it was probably the most exciting and important term in six years of medical school.

JAMIE BURNETT: Did it teach you as well to, I suppose, have more of a relationship with the person who's sitting in front of you rather than focusing on just what's wrong with them?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think gynaecology and obstetrics are very human specialties, and that's what drew me towards those. One of the things I never underestimate as a doctor is the anxieties and the fears of patients, whether that's lining up to have elective surgery, whether that's talking about very intimate problems that they might have. The joy of growing a baby and delivering a baby, I'd never underestimate how scared some people are.

JAMIE BURNETT: Especially the first time around. You touched on it, but what was the motivation, why did you decide to specialise in obstetrics?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I went and did my internship and residency at Royal Perth Hospital, and was looking for something that combined the surgical aspects of medical practice and the medicine. I was always looking for something that was halfway in between. There's a few specialties that are like that, and somewhere along the journey I decided that obstetrics and gynaecology was what I wanted to do.

JAMIE BURNETT: What's it like delivering a baby?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, delivering a baby is one of the great experiences of life. I think that my patients know that I've done it a lot of times before, but it's incredibly special. I particularly enjoy, within my private practice, the fact that I will deliver people who are only one or two degrees of separation away from me. I particularly enjoy delivering the babies of sisters. There are some families where I might have delivered up to four, six or even eight children amongst the whole family. That’s a wonderful experience.

JAMIE BURNETT: So do you have a mark on the wall? Do you know how many babies you've delivered over the journey?

MICHAEL GANNON: I've got a fair idea, and it would definitely be between 3000 and 4000.

JAMIE BURNETT: That's a few babies. That is a lot of first time cries, as I said as well earlier. Do you - can you recall the first?

MICHAEL GANNON: I can't remember exactly the first one, but I do remember one experience as a medical student at King Edward. I'd been in the room helping look after a teenage Aboriginal girl who'd been in labour all night. She eventually had to have an emergency caesarean section. The reason I remember it so clearly is my indignation at the theatre nurse asserting that I was the father of the baby and I should sit in a certain spot in theatre. So I remember, not only how afraid she was, but my indignation that I looked like someone who had fathered a child to a 14 or 15-year-old girl.

JAMIE BURNETT: Not saying that you're not fresh-faced now, but you were that fresh-faced in your early days of obstetrics that you were being confused for a father?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, well, no one says you look too young to be a doctor any more, but it used to happen for a long time.

JAMIE BURNETT: I've always found it an interesting role in many ways, and you talked about the connection that you can have with people and their families down the line in their

role as well. But when you're with someone at a moment like that, which for many is the most important moment in their life, and then it's all over and it's onto the next person, is it a challenge letting go of that relationship, or moving on in that relationship, and just getting on with the job with someone else?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think that patients perhaps underestimate how heavily it falls on doctors and nurses when things go wrong. But one of the things you need to do is move on, and you need to get out of bed the next day, even when things have gone badly, and see more patients. So you do need to move on. I think that's a real skill for doctors and nurses - having the appropriate level of emotional investment, realising how important it is to that individual but detaching yourself to one extent or another so that you can realise that you've got another patient to see in 10 minutes time or tomorrow.

JAMIE BURNETT: I want to take you back and go back a little bit to something very early in your career, and something that would be very difficult to go back to as well. Jack Batten was born on 15 March in the year 2000 at just 25 weeks and four days at King Edward Memorial Hospital, he lived for just a few hours. You were a junior doctor there at the time, what happened?

MICHAEL GANNON: This is a tragic case of a baby who I never really thought had too much of a chance. But the reason this case became famous was that it was, for some people involved in wider politics, an example of the problems at King Edward Memorial Hospital at the time - a lack of engagement of senior doctors, and a culture where junior doctors were left alone. I to this day don't think that that poor little mite had any chance, but that was the job of a senior doctor to come in to talk about all the options to the patients. And perhaps one of the options would have been not to intervene. The other option would have been to intervene earlier. That was a tragic case, that was very difficult for me to live through a process that was career-threatening, having been a registrar at King Edward for only a few weeks.

JAMIE BURNETT: What was wrong at that hospital at that stage? What was going wrong, not only in Jack's case, but others at the hospital?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, what we saw was an 18-month inquiry into the hospital, and what it did was shine a light on an unhealthy culture where senior doctors weren't coming in to difficult cases. I'm pleased to see that the majority of the recommendations from the Douglas inquiry have been implemented. It's a much safer place for junior doctors to train.

If I might reflect, it's hard to get the balance right, now they perhaps get less opportunity to test themselves and to stretch their abilities, and there are a lot more trainees now than there used to be. But those kind of situations are never appropriate. The hospital needed cultural change. I'm pleased to say that it's happened over the years.

JAMIE BURNETT: So, you're a junior doctor there at the time. Following that, you spend something like seven hours at an inquest, being asked questions about what was going wrong and what was happening. What emotional toll did that take on you?

MICHAEL GANNON: It's difficult to remember what was happening at the time. I think that sometimes when you're in the middle of something, you don't reflect a great deal on what it means. It's only in retrospect I think, that was an amazing burden to carry, to be on a witness stand for seven hours, potentially with your career at threat. The coroner has all sorts of powers. But I did enjoy the support of my family, and one thing I will never forget is that I also enjoyed the support of some senior doctors, and definitely the AMA.

JAMIE BURNETT: Did you consider quitting?

MICHAEL GANNON: I remember one night where I thought, 'no, you might just about have me here, I'll do the diploma exams in O&G, I'll get some value out of my two years at the hospital, and I'll go back to what in many ways I would have loved to have done, to be a GP obstetrician or a GP anaesthetist'. But no, I woke up the next morning, realised that I'd done nothing wrong in all of this, that I was determined to pursue my career path and moved on.

JAMIE BURNETT: So standing here now, 16 years later, with all the experience that you do have to this day, how do you reflect on that time in your career and that time I suppose at that hospital?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, it certainly toughened me up, you know? I've already referred to, if you like, an idyllic childhood. And despite the fact I didn't end up playing football for East Perth and I did fail my driver's licence a couple of times, things perhaps came easily to me. That was a huge challenge. I've never forgotten the people who went out of their way to support me. I, to this day, remain disappointed by the people who didn't support me. But I think it taught me determination to achieve what I wanted to achieve in life.

JAMIE BURNETT: Did it change you?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think it did change me. As I say, it toughened me up. I realised that there are certainly road bumps in life. I've never underestimated how difficult it is for patients who go through something like this. The sad thing for me is that it became very much a legal process.

By sheer coincidence I flew out of Australia, literally within hours of this happening, to my brother's wedding in South Africa, and I never got to spend time with the Batten family, and then it had turned into a judicial process by the time I was back. You do share moments with patients when things have gone wrong. Open communication is really important.

JAMIE BURNETT: We're fast running out of time, as we do on Who Are You? Michael Gannon, I want to fast forward a little bit - well, quite a bit, because you became the AMA WA president in 2014, you were elected as AMA President nationally just a few weeks ago as well. Why are these positions that you've sought out?

MICHAEL GANNON: I believe that this is my ability to contribute on a wider level to the community. Doctors are in the best position to determine what is the best for patients. We don't always get it right, but I would trust doctors to get it right more often than I would the bureaucracy or government. It's our job to get in there and fight for individual patients. It's our job to get in there and fight for things that can help the health of tens of thousands of people, public health measures that are so important.

So although I'm very proud of the number of babies I've delivered and the number of gynaecological patients I've seen over the years, I believe this is a bigger calling to potentially positively influence the health of even millions of people.

JAMIE BURNETT: Do you have a hit list? Do you have things that you want to achieve in the short and longer term in this role that you've really identified from the start?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, we're in the middle of an election campaign at the moment, and you know, the freeze on the rebates that patients get back to see their GP reflects a chronic disinvestment in what is the most important area of health care. Australia's got a very highly trained and excellent GP workforce. If we invest in them, we can end up spending a whole lot less money in more expensive hospital treatment.

I'm also interested in health literacy, just helping people understand the decisions they make each day when they put hundreds of dollars' worth of vitamins and supplements in their body. You know, better information about diet, exercise, the preventive health measures.

JAMIE BURNETT: So a change really in the conversation more broadly with the community around health and medicine?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think we can do so much better in health literacy. I'm amazed by the questions that pregnant women ask me each week. I would love for them to understand the choices they make about their bodies, both as young, healthy women and obviously in their pregnancies.

JAMIE BURNETT: Now this role at the AMA as State President, and National President as well, longer term, is it a path into politics for you, Michael Gannon?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, people ask that question all the time. Parliamentary politics is one way you can contribute to your community; the work I'm doing with the AMA is another way. I'm certainly interested in politics, I always have been, but I don't necessarily see it as a career path for me.

JAMIE BURNETT: So we might not necessarily see Michael Gannon representing those in Dianella as the Federal Member for Perth in coming years?

MICHAEL GANNON: No, I think Michael Keenan's fairly safe at the moment.

JAMIE BURNETT: [Laughs] Okay. Just finally, Michael Gannon, are you happy?

MICHAEL GANNON: I've very happy. I feel blessed to have the job I do. I feel hugely humbled and honoured to have been elected to this position to represent the tens of thousands of doctors, a fantastic profession with an ancient history. I'm humbled by the honour. I love my working life. Part of my private practice has to go on hold for the next couple of years.

JAMIE BURNETT: Michael Gannon, really appreciate you coming in and sharing some stories with us today. Thanks so much.

MICHAEL GANNON: Thank you Jamie.

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8 June 2016

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