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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, Radio National, *Breakfast*, 11 July 2017

Subject: Medicare Security Review

FRAN KELLY: Until last week you might have been forgiven for thinking- taking for granted that your private Medicare details were kept secure. But an investigation by The Guardian last week has revealed that Medicare card numbers were being available for sale - illegally of course - on the dark web. Now the Federal Government has announced a review of the online system available for health professionals to access Medicare system numbers. It's a system which is used 45,000 times each day.

Dr Michael Gannon, is President of the AMA and he's a member of this inquiry, the panel been set up to look into this. Michael Gannon, thank you very much for joining us.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning, Fran.

FRAN KELLY: Given the apparent data breach, the fact that, according to The Guardian, Medicare numbers are available for sale - pretty cheap price around \$30 on the dark web. Do you still have confidence in the privacy and security of our Medicare details?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well certainly we're concerned about this and that's why we've applauded the Government on acting on this. But to put it in perspective my understanding is somewhere around 100-150 individual Medicare card numbers are available on the dark web. They've almost certainly been obtained by someone working within a health setting - now whether that's a doctor's surgery or not is being determined by the Australian Federal Police. But every day, staff in doctors' rooms either use online mechanisms or telephone to obtain 45,000 Medicare numbers so that people can receive care. So that's north of 200,000 times a week and more than a million times a month. That means that people can get care even though they've forgotten their Medicare card in an emergency setting or just because they've simply forgotten. That's a really important system - the HPOS system - and the reason why it's so important that we're involved in the review is that we don't trash a system that's made it so much easier for millions of patients to obtain care ...

FRAN KELLY: [Interrupts] I want to come back to that - the balance between security and accessibility. But just before we do can you explain for everyone listening - this system, it's the Health Professional Online Service is the HPOS web portal. A lot of people have access to it; doctors, hospital staff, health clinics, something like more than 200,000 people have access to this system which means they can look up anyone's Medicare number. That's it in a nutshell, yes?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, that's exactly right. And so this is of concern. It's one of the bits of information that might enable you to obtain access to someone's electronic health record, but of course there's a whole number of other steps of security you need before you can look at that. But one of the steps you might use to perform an act of identity fraud, of course you need to get other bits of information, the single mechanism by which you could theoretically pose as an Australian citizen and obtain free or subsidised health services. So there's no question it's of concern. The question is how can we maintain a system that has made it so easy for people to obtain care when often through no fault of their own they've forgotten their Medicare card, how do we not trash that system while maintaining greater security for a number which does have some value for criminal elements?

FRAN KELLY: And what is the answer to that do you think? You must have thought about this already - what is the answer to that? Do we need to put more checks and balances on our Medicare number? Do we have to have another pin or what do you think?

MICHAEL GANNON: That would be great if we had yet another pin number to remember. But certainly across every element of this you need other bits of information. Look, we are concerned about identity fraud, we are concerned about people falsely claiming rebates on the basis of the generosity of the Australian taxpayers. I sought urgent reassurances from the head of the Australian Digital Health Agency that this couldn't result in a breach of people's confidential patient records. The only thing I will say is that I have to applaud Minister Tudge on keeping me informed and involving the medical profession in any solution to this problem.

FRAN KELLY: And just finally, Michael Gannon, I mean you're going to be a part of this investigation now and you say that's important because you don't want consumers to lose easy access to getting the medical treatment they need if they've lost their Medicare card or don't have one. So it's important in that sense. But with that many people with access to the system is that too many? And presumably you must know already by now with that many people using the system of breaches of this system?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well we are aware of breaches but they just need to be put in perspective. Yeah, we're talking about 100 cards or so in a system that has facilitated the care of literally tens of millions of patients over the eight years. We're not the IT experts necessarily, but the expertise that we will bring to Professor Shergold's committee is an understanding of what doctors and their staff need to provide care and advocating for patients on making sure that they don't have any barriers in the way of receiving care from doctors and other professionals.

FRAN KELLY: Michael Gannon, thank you very much for joining us.

MICHAEL GANNON: Pleasure, Fran.

FRAN KELLY: Doctor Michael Gannon, the President of the AMA and he's a member of this review team the Government set up headed by Peter Shergold who's the former head of course of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

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