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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, ABC Radio Perth, Drive, Wednesday, 6 March 2019

Subject: Bupa and TerryWhite Chemmart partnership

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Now, statistics out last month told us what, I guess, many of you already knew. Fewer of you are taking up or keeping your private health insurance. Indeed, with only about 45 per cent of the population covered and premiums set to rise again soon, I wonder if you're about to make a decision to ditch or to keep. Let me know, 1300-222720, or that text number 0437-922720.

Now, keeping in mind that reforms are coming to try and bring more clarity to what you actually need and what you're actually being offered, one of the big international players, Bupa, has announced it will join up with the TerryWhite Chemmart pharmacies to offer what it calls a range of health services and benefits, and a health app aimed at providing personalised care. As you might imagine upon hearing that, the AMA has come out swinging, saying that any such partnership undermines quality general practice. I guess you will be the judge of that. I'm joined by the AMA President, Tony Bartone. Tony, good afternoon.

TONY BARTONE: Good afternoon, Geoff.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Can you explain what the health insurer and the pharmacy business is trying to establish?

TONY BARTONE: It would seem they're trying to develop a relationship where they will seek to insert a different level, or a different model of care around the primary care, the general practice type requirements of our patients, their customers, by having this novel approach. But clearly, what's being forgotten in here is the Bupa customers, the patients, what they're being asked to accept is a different model of care which sees inappropriate care delivered at a time and a place without the usual oversight, without the usual tailored-ness with the whole patient care that is what you'd expect from your general practitioner.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Can I just be clear here - what specifically then is Bupa and the pharmacy offering? Is it to circumvent the GP? Is it to say: come to us and we will look after a range of your health needs in a one stop shop?

TONY BARTONE: That's probably not a bad summation. It's looking to fragment the care, it's looking to completely try and insert another optionality, another model of care, in between what Australians have come to accept and expect as their access, their entry point into preventative and primary health care in Australia. More than 90 per cent of patients in Australia have a relationship with a doctor or a practice.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: And if I'm a Bupa customer, maybe I'll look at it differently and say: well if this service is being made available to me through this pharmacy, I don't need to go to the doctor. And I don't like going to the doctor, so I will go for my vaccination, or I will go to get some advice to stop smoking.

TONY BARTONE: So, it's about two things. It's about scope of practice. So pharmacists are excellent people at managing and delivering medication advice; that's what their training is about. And it's about recognising that you should exert your competencies within the scope of

practice that you are appropriately trained to. But when it comes to the best quality, the best options for primary health care, all the studies have shown time and time again Australia has one of the best primary healthcare systems in the world, if not the best. Our outcomes are second to none. And we're the envy of most countries around the world when it comes to our primary healthcare services.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Tony Bartone is the President of the AMA, my guest on Drive this afternoon. To those of you with private health cover, do you want to see your insurers expand their areas of interest? Do you want them forming exclusive partnerships with certain pharmacy groups, or dentists, or doctors? Does that seem like an expansion of choice to you or a lessening of choice? 1300-222720.

Tony Bartone, we've certainly been here before. This is a familiar battleground for the AMA, when other health players expand services or express a wish to do so. It could be health insurers, or pharmacists, or at other times nursing practitioners; anyone it seems, who want some opportunity to enter your space. You are always very defensively saying: patients will be at risk here. Do we believe you when you say it?

TONY BARTONE: Don't just believe me, believe the evidence, believe the statistics, believe the outcomes that Australia has achieved in terms of its health service and its health outcomes over a number of decades. Let me look at it from a different point of view. When we look at private health insurers, we're looking at transparency of their product offering. Already in this current market, private health insurance is suffering from a downturn in terms of customers. They are walking away, making decisions not to renew because of lack of transparency, lack of value for money, and lack of acknowledgement of what their contributions will get them at the end.

In terms of my pharmacy colleagues, we work as part of a multi-disciplinary centred team. That is clearly what the best practice models of primary care talk about – a GP-led multi-disciplinary care team, led by the GP, but all players playing their part. And, clearly, we will work with pharmacists as part of that team to deliver the best care for our patients. And it's about the patient always. That's who we worry about. That's why we jump and down about this situation time and time again because, at the end of the day, it's about the patients that I look after, the patients that every other doctor, colleague, member, looks after. And about offering patients the best quality care and not a second level alternative at their expense.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Tony Bartone is the President of the AMA, my guest on Drive this afternoon. I'm sure many of our listeners will agree with that assessment of private health insurance, what it offers and what we pay for. Tony Bartone, are we going to see though more of these kinds of partnerships being established, and then it will be up to the customer, the consumer, to decide if they want to be part of them?

TONY BARTONE: There's going to be increasing pressure on funds as members walk away from their insurance products to look at alternative opportunities. So I expect more partnerships, more deals to be done.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: And you, as a representative of the AMA and the GPs community, would be saying what to consumers? Keep away from these relationships?

TONY BARTONE: Well, first of all, understand that the person that can best advocate for your needs in everyday primary care is your GP. And continue to see your GP for health advice and not to look at second or third level options, which really, at the end of the day, may delay, may duplicate, or may fragment your care with unintended consequences.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Thank you very much for talking to me this afternoon.

TONY BARTONE: My pleasure. Have a good afternoon.

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