

**Australian Medical Association Limited**

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**Transcript:** AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, ABC News Evenings, 19 October 2017

**Subject:** Euthanasia and physician assisted suicide

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**TRACEY HOLMES:** Victoria could soon become the first place in Australia where a doctor can legally help their patient end their life. The State Parliament debated the *Assisted Dying Bill* into the early hours of this morning, with almost every MP rising to give their personal views. While MPs opposed to the Bill are not giving up without a fight, the State's Opposition has conceded it is likely to pass the Lower House tonight. So what might happen nationally if the Bill passes, and what's the reaction from the medical establishment?

Joining us is the National President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Michael Gannon. Dr Gannon, thanks for joining us. You've made your own personal opposition to euthanasia very clear. What are your current thoughts on what's happening in the Victorian Parliament?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Look, any public commentary I've made is based on the AMA's Position Statement, which I was involved in in a very detailed fashion, first as Chair of the Ethics Committee, and then as President when we released it last year.

Certainly, we're watching events in Victoria with great interest. It's been the case for some weeks now, it's been stated that those promoting the Yes case have the numbers. We'll wait and see. I think that Members in the Lower House can do better on end-of-life care than to pass this Bill. If it does pass tonight, the action moves to the Upper House. If this Bill passes the Upper House, well, then it becomes a legal option in terms of the management of patients.

Some people are keen to point to the different emphasis between the Federal AMA and the Victorian AMA. I think one of the things my colleagues in Victoria have been very keen to do is to make sure that they have a seat at the table if it is legislated, to make sure that we maximise protections both for our members and for our patients.

**TRACEY HOLMES:** So you don't see this in any way, if it does pass, causing a split or a rift in the AMA?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** No, I think this issue is bigger than the AMA. The AMA's statement is very clear that Parliamentarians have a role in making laws for their citizens. Society makes these decisions, doctors don't, but doctors will not fail to give their unique perspective, and especially if a State is going to legislate physician assisted suicide, then we're right in the middle of it.

The Andrews Government and other Parliaments in Australia that are considering Bills – there's a Private Member's Bill that's there ready to go in New South Wales, there's a Parliamentary Committee in Western Australia – what we would say to them is: consider the issues, consider how this affects medical care, how it affects the health system as a whole, and don't be surprised when there's opposition against something which has been part of medical ethics for centuries.

**TRACEY HOLMES:** Let's say it passes – and I know this is hypothetical, but we're dealing with a hypothetical situation at the moment – if it passes and other States also start to pass

similar legislation, what sort of a position does it put doctors in who don't agree with it, such as yourself?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Well, what's happened in different parts of the world - you may be aware, for example, that in four US States there's one form or another of euthanasia physician assisted suicide laws, there's laws in Germany, in Switzerland, in Belgium, the Netherlands. In most of those countries, the national medical associations maintain a position that doctors should not involve themselves in these types of interventions. Now, the High Court in Canada in recent years ruled that barring euthanasia assisted suicide was illegal. The Canadian Medical Association has adopted a neutral position on the topic.

One thing which is well established in Australian ethics is the right of conscientious objection. One of the things we know from when we surveyed our members is - we found lots of interesting things when we surveyed our members. We found a majority of doctors don't support euthanasia, but we also found a majority of doctors felt that, if it was legislated by society, it should be provided by doctors.

The next interesting thing we found is that not many individual doctors indicated an interest or a willingness in doing it themselves. Doctors are not trained to kill people. It is deep within our ethics, deep within our training that that's not appropriate. Now, not every doctor agrees with that.

What our survey also shows – and we know this – is that, just like the whole of society, doctors have a diverse range of views on this topic. And there are many doctors who have made it very, very clear that, should this be legislated in Victoria or elsewhere, they are prepared to provide those treatments. Those doctors will not be ostracised from the medical community, that's not appropriate. In fact, they might be a group of doctors who need our protection.

I worry about the protections in this Bill for doctors providing these services. We know from the Canadian experience that many doctors who have done this once have said 'never again'. So we will be doing everything we can to provide support for doctors who are acting within the law of the land.

**TRACEY HOLMES:** We appreciate your time today, thank you.

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Okay, pleasure, Tracey.

**TRACEY HOLMES:** That's Dr Michael Gannon, the President of the Australian Medical Association.

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20 October 2017

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