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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, 6PR, *Mornings with Gareth Parker*, Monday, 19 October 2020

Subject: Roadmap out of COVID-19 restrictions

GARETH PARKER: More information still to come out later today on the New Zealand travel situation, but in the meantime, the AMA is wondering whether our COVID strategy overall is sustainable. The President of the AMA is Dr Omar Khorshid. Omar, good morning.

OMAR KHORSHID: Morning, Gareth.

GARETH PARKER: Why do you think that the roadmap needs a revisit?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, we've learnt so much about COVID. We've seen the disasters happening in Europe at the moment, where they had a pretty good summer, they opened up, they thought they were pretty much over it. Complacency set in and now they're back with hospitals overflowing, thousands of deaths, and economies going back into lockdown yet again.

We've also learnt from Victoria that just a little bit of complacency, acting too late, leads to disaster. And it's important that we remember those lessons as we plan our future going forward.

GARETH PARKER: So why is the Australian strategy the wrong strategy? With the exception of Victoria, you would have to say that our response has led most places in the world.

OMAR KHORSHID: Our response has been fantastic so far. Our problem with the roadmap is twofold. One is that each State does seem to still have slightly different strategies, and that's leading to a lot of the conflict around our borders etc.

But the other is that the endpoint for the roadmap at the moment is basically like what's happening here in Western Australia – no restrictions at all, a normal economy. And we've learnt from everywhere in the world that no matter what other quarantine things you put in place, even New Zealand, which was doing so well, still managed to get an outbreak.

So the lesson is we need a small level of background restrictions. If COVID gets into our community - and WA is particularly vulnerable of all the States in Australia to this - if it gets through that quarantine, whether it's off a bulk carrier off Port Hedland or whether it's across one of our hard borders, it will be rife through our community before we realise because we're not getting tested, we're not socially distancing. We're very complacent.

It's fantastic, we are in the best place in the world. But we're very vulnerable to COVID, and what the AMA is saying is probably we need a little bit more, we need to be a little bit more like New South Wales. A little bit more vigilant, a little bit more socially distant, but making sure we've got testing, tracing mechanisms ready to go when we need them.

GARETH PARKER: Okay. So are you saying that the WA strategy is misguided?

OMAR KHORSHID: We're saying that it is not going to be a long-term strategy. If you knew you were definitely going to get a 100 per cent effective vaccine early next year, then to be honest, I think the WA strategy is pretty good. But if you're putting on that hat of 'well, what happens if we're still like this in two years' time? Are we still going to be completely isolated from the rest of the world for years? Is that really going to be acceptable for WA people? And can we keep our borders perfect for a couple of years?', the likelihood is we can't, the lessons of history show that we can't. So, let's prepare for that now. Let's open up our borders. Let's put in a little bit more restrictions than we've got now,

unfortunately, it may mean you can't go to the footy and we may need to register when you go to the pub so they know how many people are there. You may need to go back to your four square metre rule, but it would mean that we can open up and we're prepared for the long-term fight against this terrible virus.

GARETH PARKER: I suspect the return to the four square metre rule, shut down mass events, would not be popular?

OMAR KHORSHID: No, it won't be popular. We absolutely get that. But another lockdown, like what we're seeing in Victoria wouldn't be popular either. And, at the moment, we are gambling as a State. We are the most complacent of any of the States in Australia. What the AMA is saying is: let's get together as a country. There's the expert medical advice being relied on by all the State Premiers, all the Chief Health Officers. They do get together; they talk to each other. They should be able to work out what is our national strategy. How do we find that balance between open economies, but also protecting the vulnerable in the community, including aged care, which is not ready here in Western Australia. If there's an outbreak, we'll see death.

GARETH PARKER: Why do you say aged care's not ready? They've had eight months to get ready and to learn the lessons of Victoria, in particular.

OMAR KHORSHID: They have had time, haven't they? But what they haven't got is resources. They haven't got money and some of the measures that have put in place in Victoria are not going to be stood up in other States until there's an outbreak. So, it relies on the aged care settings, the actual facilities, doing the right thing. And some of them have done a really good job. Some of them are small, they just don't have the resources, the money, to be able to get themselves ready. Because this virus, once it gets in, is so hard to control.

GARETH PARKER: Do you think that the contact tracing and testing regime in Western Australia is up to scratch? It's untested and we're sort of pleased that it's untested, because it means we're not dealing with the virus. But I mean, the Premier's comments at the weekend that he was fearful of mass deaths, I mean, they were quite remarkable comments, I thought. I thought they portrayed a lack of confidence in our systems here.

OMAR KHORSHID: Yeah, I think you're exactly right. They are untested. So, I don't know any better than you do whether Western Australia is properly set up with testing and tracing. I know that we're not doing enough testing, because we all know the tests are going to be negative. But the problem is that when someone does break through our quarantine, we're not going to know because people who get cold and flu symptoms or have hay fever symptoms aren't getting tested.

There's no doubt that we are at risk here in Western Australia. We're doing the best of anywhere in the world, but we're at risk, and what the AMA is saying is: let's mitigate that risk by actually tightening things a little bit and following a national strategy for dealing with this virus in the longer term. Let's play the long game here.

GARETH PARKER: Do you think that - I mean, the AMA and doctors generally were among the first to call for the closure of the State border back in March. Do you think that that policy was the correct policy, and at what point should it reopen?

OMAR KHORSHID: The AMA in WA called for the closure of the State border, and it has to be recognised that it has been the most successful strategy, other than closing the national borders, in protecting Western Australia against COVID. But you've also got to recognise the impact on people's lives, on families that are split, on businesses, and there's a balance there. And what we're saying is that

once the rest of the country is in very low risk situations, like the bulk of the country is at the moment, then there is an argument to actually open up the WA State border with very little risk. But it may mean actually tightening the restrictions that we're on our lives that we're enjoying at the moment and we probably aren't ready.

GARETH PARKER: What about New Zealand? Sorry, what about New Zealand? Because we've seen today that there's 23 New Zealanders who have arrived here in Western Australia and there's- well, we're still unclear on what the plan is from here, but they don't represent a risk, particularly do they? In a health sense?

OMAR KHORSHID: No, I don't think New Zealanders represent a risk. They've, as you know, been more successful than Australia in controlling COVID, although they've probably had a bigger impact on their economy. But, they're not a risk to West Australians and nor, to be frank, are Queenslanders, Northern Territory or South Australians at the moment. But, I guess what is worrying the Premier is what happens if on the other end of their borders they do the wrong thing? If someone gets into New Zealand, if someone gets into South Australia and they come into WA, we've lost control.

But to be honest, that risk is there now; there are lots of people coming into Western Australia. They're going through quarantine, and we know quarantine is not perfect. There are these ships that are bringing in COVID regularly now in small numbers and the Government's doing a great job in controlling that. But at some point, every system's going to fail and let's be ready for when those systems do fail.

GARETH PARKER: Alright. Omar Khorshid, thank you for your time.

OMAR KHORSHID: Good morning, Gareth. Cheers.

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