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Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Chris Zappala, Sky News, *Live Now with Stacey Lee*, Tuesday, 25 June 2019

Subject: Measles

STACEY LEE: We're going to get some more on this now. Doctor Chris Zappala joins me live. He is the Vice President of the Australian Medical Association.

Doctor, thanks so much for your time today. This news out today is pretty concerning for a lot of people, especially parents. What's the advice? Should we all be aiming to get a third [vaccination]?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Look, good afternoon. I don't think we've got enough information to really be committing to that at the moment. Remember, this was a very small number of people who several decades ago had their appropriate vaccinations. We'd need time to have a look at whether there was another reason why these people got the measles virus. For example, were they immunosuppressed? Did they have other medical problems? So we've got a little bit of work to do to understand this more fully. But it in no way detracts from the huge value of measles vaccination in our community and overseas, and as per the National Immunisation Program, we should definitely be getting those two shots for our infants, our kids. And remember, if you're behind you can catch up.

STACEY LEE: It has raised a lot of questions about the need for vaccinations. Does this give some validity to the claims of those people dubbed anti-vaxxers, who say: what's the point of getting it if you're still going to get the illness despite having both boosters?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Oh look, please don't suggest that. That's, you know, a dangerous thought. Vaccination is hugely beneficial. I mean, remember the wards of polio victims that's now been eradicated; the kids that used to come in with meningitis to emergency departments and have hearing or neurological problems as a result; and other conditions, as well, that we've managed to virtually wipe out. Part of the problem here is that vaccination rates are not as high as they should be. We need to have that herd or community-level of protection so that these viruses can't get a foothold and circulate in communities in the first place. Vaccination's safe, effective. Please have confidence in it. It's very important as a community that we do commit to that schedule and do it as well as possible.

STACEY LEE: Absolutely, but how can you ensure that the vaccinations are evolving at the same rate as, obviously, the illness is?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Immunity wanes in all of us. It wanes over time as we age. And remember, as I say, these individuals were several decades away from having had their two vaccines. Now, whether a third booster is required - and we're familiar with boosters in general, aren't we, with other illnesses? Let's just wait until we've done a little bit more work on that, and if it's required then it can be based on evidence and we can make that recommendation to the population as a whole. It's possible, but let's have a look at it properly and just see.

As I say, there might be other reasons that these individuals got the measles virus, and so we need to just have a look at that and examine those cases in a little bit more detail.

STACEY LEE: So what needs to take place now? You'll go back and look at those cases, talk to those people about what exactly? What will you be doing?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Well, I think as a profession we need to have a look at those cases. Our infectious diseases and so on, we'll have a look at whether there were any qualifiers or reason that might have made those individuals more susceptible. We can have a look at the strength of immunity over time in individuals as well. And just really take stock with where things are up to with this vaccine. It's not like the flu, for example, where we know the virus mutates very quickly, and that's one of the reasons we have to have annual vaccination for the flu vac.

So, yes, we've definitely got work to do. I'm sure the international community in medicine will be interested in this. Let's not forget that we've got measles outbreaks overseas at the moment that we need to contain. And vaccination is still the best way to do that. So I think all I can say is: have confidence in vaccination, but watch this space. If we need to do an update or a booster, then we'll have a look at that in the period to come.

STACEY LEE: Okay, so the advice for parents out there who have young children who might be due for their measles vaccination [audio skip] still advising them to get that vaccination?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Yes, absolutely. There's the two vaccinations that are on the National Immunisation Program in infancy, and there's no doubt that they provide excellent levels of protection. We're talking, you know, more than 99 per cent protection, and if there is a waning of immunity - and that's a big if - if there is, that's not going to happen straight away, yeah? It's going to happen, as we've seen possibly in these cases, over several decades, much later in the lifespan. So, please have confidence in vaccination. Definitely get your infants vaccinated. Make sure they've had both vaccinations because that just tops up that immunity to a little bit higher level to make sure that everyone's protected.

STACEY LEE: For people out there who are seeking more information, are there any websites or information online that you can suggest that they go to? Because we know there is so much out there and a lot of it isn't reputable. So where can you suggest they go if they do want to get some more on this?

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Look, I think that's a really good question. There's so much unfiltered and worryingly incorrect information online. As always, the first port of call for your health is your general practitioner. So please go see your GP. Go with your list of questions all prepared and ask them, and your GP will be able to answer those queries and concerns. I think that's always the best place to start when you have health questions or concerns.

STACEY LEE: That's very good advice. Doctor, thanks so much for your time.

CHRIS ZAPPALA: Good afternoon.

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