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Transcript: AMA President, A/Prof Brian Owler, Radio National, 27 October 2014

Subject: Urgent need for an immediate and comprehensive response to the worsening Ebola epidemic

FRAN KELLY: A senior United Nations official has criticised other countries for not doing enough to combat the Ebola crisis in West Africa. Samantha Power is the US Ambassador to the UN and she says - and I'm quoting here, you have countries at the UN where I work every day who are signing on to resolutions and praising the good work that the US and Britain and others are doing but they themselves haven't taken the responsibility yet to send doctors, to send beds, to send a reasonable amount of money.

Her criticism comes as the World Health Organisation releases new figures showing more than 10,000 people have now contracted the virus and it has a near 50 per cent fatality rate. While the Abbott Government has steadfastly refused to send Australian teams without an evacuation plan in place, the Health Minister Peter Dutton has told AM this morning that all options are under discussion.

PETER DUTTON: The Prime Minister, Minister Morrison and myself met yesterday afternoon with the chiefs of our respective departments and senior advisors otherwise on just gaming through, if you like, different scenarios and ways in which we can respond very quickly both domestically and internationally if that's required. So, I think it's prudent for us to go through all of the options that might be available.

The Government's not taken a decision in relation to health workers in sending them overseas so if we have an announcement to make, we'll make it in due course.

[End of excerpt]

FRAN KELLY: Health Minister Peter Dutton speaking earlier on AM. Well, the Australian Medical Association says Australia's response has been, quote, a shambles. The AMA President Brian Owler is speaking here with our political editor, Alison Carabine.

ALISON CARABINE: Brian Owler, good morning.

BRIAN OWLER: Good morning.

ALISON CARABINE: Brian Owler, the number of Ebola cases has exceeded 10,000, more than 4900 people have died. Is it now beyond any doubt that the world is grappling with a fully blown humanitarian crisis?

BRIAN OWLER: No, there is no doubt and there's been no doubt about that for weeks and, I mean, they're the cases that we actually know about and have been reported and confirmed but the suspicion is that there are many more and as you watch time go on you've seen an exponential rise in the number of cases, particularly in areas such as Sierra Leone and Liberia. So this is a humanitarian crisis of an unprecedented proportion in terms of the medical crisis, and the WHO and UN use those terms very carefully.

I mean, we've got to remember that these sorts of organisations are not trying to scare people when they talk about potentially 10,000 infections per week, 1.4 million infections in West Africa. This is a very significant crisis and it is only going to be addressed through a global response.

ALISON CARABINE: And Australia, of course, is part of the globe. It is yet to send any medical workers to West Africa. You heard Peter Dutton say there that the Government is working through the best way to respond. It's prudent to go through all the options. Now, we understand a team of 16 health workers has been assembled for deployment to the West Africa region once it's given the go ahead by the Government. What do you know about this team, who are they, what's been their training for example?

BRIAN OWLER: Well, that's a very, very good question because the Chief Medical Officer wasn't aware of that team last week. The head of the Department of Health was - seemed to be the only person that was aware of this team. Even the AUSMAT people in Darwin, which would be the obvious group to go and do this work is not aware of this team of 16 health care workers.

ALISON CARABINE: So, the team wouldn't be Australian Medical Assistance Teams?

BRIAN OWLER: Well, that's our understanding so far. We've been in contact with that team (AusMat) and they don't know anything about the 16 health care workers that were mentioned in Senate Estimates and I am concerned that this team - about their training, about who they are, about how they're going to be supported and what their background is. I mean, the worst thing we can do is throw together a team at the last minute. There are volunteers including those that are associated with AUSMAT that we know are willing to go and do this work, and that's the appropriate team to be trained and supported and cast to go and do that sort of work in West Africa.

ALISON CARABINE: And Brian Owler, there is a report in the Daily Telegraph this morning that one of the plans being developed is to send volunteer teams but only on the condition that they are quarantined overseas for 21 days before returning to Australia. If that is the case, would that be an adequate precaution?

BRIAN OWLER: Look, I think the issue about quarantining people when they come back or quarantining them overseas is a significant issue. It is going to discourage people from going and doing this work. They'll obviously have to give up weeks before they go and are deployed in terms of training but also they'll be over there already for most cases about four weeks so adding another three weeks of isolation overseas is - presumably in West Africa - is going to mean more disruption.

Now, to date the isolation has involved being quarantined at home and that has worked effectively when people [indistinct] that and we've seen a number of Australian health care workers return home from West Africa and follow those protocols appropriately and that's worked very well. I think it would actually be much better and safer for them to be at home, here, provided when they travel they obviously show no sign - symptoms of the disease and then, in that case, they'd be quite safe.

ALISON CARABINE: And if an Australian health worker contracted the Ebola virus in West Africa, would there be adequate facilities in Liberia or Sierra Leone or Guinea to treat them?

BRIAN OWLER: Well, of course, this is one of the frustrating things about the Government's response. Over and over again we're hearing about a 30 hour flight home but, for over a month now, we've known that the UK and the US are building health - treatment centres that are dedicated to international health care workers, which will have state-of-the-art facilities and...

ALISON CARABINE: And they - are they up and running yet?

BRIAN OWLER: They're not up and running yet but they will be in the near future and these are going to be located, both in Sierra Leone and in Liberia and so, as part of the approach to the Australian Government, so the UK and the US have both asked the Australian Government over a month ago now to contribute human resources to this problem. And you would expect that as part of that there would be some cooperation in relation to the way that those health care workers are treated.

Now, I really don't see why the Australian Government, with all its resources and relationships, is not able to solve this problem given that non-government organisations such as the Red Cross and MSF seem to have been able to handle this problem without any difficulty.

ALISON CARABINE: And Brian Owler, the 18-year-old West African girl who arrived in Queensland 12 days ago, she's tested negative for Ebola. Some US states have introduced mandatory health testing of arrivals from Africa. Is that something Australia should also consider?

BRIAN OWLER: No, I think we've got to be driven by the evidence. In fact, that case was very unlikely, of course, to have had Ebola in the first case just because they'd come from West Africa. They'd had no contacts with people with Ebola. We've actually had cases just about in every capital city now for weeks that have been turning up and been testing for Ebola which have not necessarily reached the media and all those cases have tested negative, obviously, and been handled appropriately.

The idea of testing people when they arrive - sure, we can identify people from when they arrive. We need to test their temperature and ask them questions about where they've been and symptoms. But in terms of actually testing them, unless they're actually showing symptoms of the disease, we're not going to actually find a positive test.

ALISON CARABINE: So, just finally and briefly, you're happy with the existing protocols with regards to keeping Ebola out of Australia?

BRIAN OWLER: Well, the protocols that are in place, I mean, they extend right back to the source. So, even before people actually leave Liberia they have their temperature tested about three or four times. They're not allowed to leave if they show any signs of the disease. The same when they're in transit, usually in Casablanca or one of those sorts of places where most of the flights go through and then, of course, we are able to identify people here if they come through immigration and they're identified as well.

Now, I don't think locking people up in an isolation ward is the right approach to people unless they're showing any signs of the disease because, unless someone's showing symptoms, they are not contagious and there's no risk to the public from those people.

ALISON CARABINE: Brian Owler, we'll leave it there. Thanks again for joining RN Breakfast.

BRIAN OWLER: It's a pleasure, thank you.

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