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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, with Patricia Karvelas, Radio National, RN Drive, 29 November 2017

Subject: Health of asylum seekers on Manus Island

PATRICIA KARVELAS: The Australian Medical Association's President met Immigration Minister Peter Dutton in Canberra today to discuss concerns about the asylum seekers and refugees on Manus Island. The AMA's been calling for the Federal Government to agree to send an independent group of medical experts and doctors to assess the health of the hundreds of men there.

AMA President Dr Michael Gannon joins me now. Dr Gannon, thank you for your time again. What did you get out the meeting?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I'd like to thank the Minister for giving us a hearing. He allowed me to put our case firmly. Allowed us to put a case of a constructive offer to help in line with what we've been saying, not only a lot over the past couple of weeks since the detention centre was closed, but going back months and years, about our concerns about the mental health and the physical health of the men on Manus Island.

He did not agree to that basic offer of an AMA-nominated delegation of senior doctors with expertise and different specialist fields, but I'm pleased to say that we got a good hearing and, certainly, he's made some concessions that will improve the lot of these men.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Tell me about these concessions. What are the concessions?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, one of the biggest problems we've had in recent months is that myself personally and the AMA more broadly had regular contact, had a relationship with Dr John Brayley, the Chief Medical Officer of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.

Dr Brayley, for his own reasons, resigned. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer is no longer with the Department.

There's someone acting in that role, but one of the things the Minister agreed with today is that he would do everything possible to accelerate the appointment of someone to that position substantively.

And he would see no reason why they would not be able to reopen communication channels with myself, with the AMA, so that we can look at individual cases and, where possible, advocate on behalf of those patients or, more broadly, about the health services available both to the men on Manus Island and, for that matter, to the men, women and children on Nauru.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: But you've got a blanket 'no' to your idea of a delegation?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly he gave us a good hearing, but he indicated that that was not going to happen.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: Why?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think that the Minister, I'll quote from him directly, was concerned that whoever we nominated, whoever we sent would find it impossible to divorce their feelings as advocates for these men from the more focused attention on their healthcare needs. I promised the Minister ...

PATRICIA KARVELAS: [Interrupts] Is that something that you have an objection to, I suppose, as a doctor, because doctors are meant to act professionally, you know, you sign up to some significant ethical agreements as part of your job.

Would you let it get in the way of actually doing your job?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I'm certainly not going to get offended by the Minister's contention. Every day, we have to make very difficult decisions, often about patients who we are very close to, but the miserable situation that these men on Manus find themselves in, what they've been through to arrive at this point, the sheer desolation they feel, I think it would be very hard to detach oneself from that.

Now, I'm disappointed with the Minister's refusal to allow that to happen. I'm happy that he's talking to us, his door is open to us. I intend to continue to keep him to his word about promises he made on behalf of his Department and on behalf of IHMS, the private provider that's providing health services on Nauru and Manus Island. I'll keep him to his promises.

And if there are developments, we might have another go at it. It remains our stated policy.

PATRICIA KARVELAS: So, how will these men's mental health issues be dealt with then?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, one thing the Minister made very clear is that clinical services afforded to these men will be provided through IHMS.

Now, it's been stated to me by experts in the field, including my colleagues who have first-hand experience, that we need to do better in terms of the mental health services.

The Minister told me today that the trauma and torture counselling service is in the process of being re-established. That's one of the key objectives I wanted out of today's meeting.

And he was also very open about funding and an appropriate level of service. It was put to me recently that there was a good service on Nauru of visiting psychiatrists and psychologists. Better than the service available on Manus Island. I'm going to hold the Minister to his word on that.

I can promise him and others that we will be talking regularly with IHMS and trying to get whatever assurances that we can that the mental health needs, both of those men who have been transferred to Port Moresby because of more acute healthcare needs, or the men remaining on Manus Island, and for that matter the people on Nauru.

We will be seeking assurances, to the extent that they can be obtained, that the mental health services are reaching the appropriate standard.

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