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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Nine, *Today with Charles Croucher and Sylvia Jeffreys*, Wednesday, 13 January 2021

Subject: COVID vaccine safety; Australian Open tennis; health misinformation on social media

CHARLES CROUCHER: Let's go to our top story now, because the Federal Government is this morning being urged to pause and revise its vaccine rollout plans as top doctors raise concerns about the effectiveness of Australia's choice of jab, the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

Joining me from Perth is Australian Medical Association President, Dr Omar Khorshid. Good morning Dr Khorshid. It's important to note, and we've mentioned this a couple of times, that there are no health concerns. These concerns are around the jab being only 65 per cent effective, while the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are 95 per cent effective. Has the Government put its eggs in the wrong basket?

OMAR KHORSHID: Good morning. The Government actually hasn't put its eggs all in one basket. The Government did deals with a number of companies well before there was any data about whether their vaccines were ever going to come to pass. And so far, two of those look like they're going to be available in Australia, and there's potentially more to come.

There's a lot we don't know yet about these vaccines; the data is still early. We do know some things, so we do know that they're all safe, and we do know that they all seem to prevent you getting sick with COVID. So, that's a really important thing. What we don't know, though, is how well they stop you transmitting the disease to somebody else or carrying the disease. And we don't know which vaccine's going to be best for which different parts of the population, and that's all data that we're going to find out more about as time comes.

What is critical, though, is that you've got access to the vaccine. So, when you're making a decision around which vaccine to give, there's a whole lot of stuff that the public don't need to worry about, because there's smart people that are advising the Government to tell them what to do to rollout this really important program.

CHARLES CROUCHER: We have 50 odd million doses of this AstraZeneca vaccine on order. Is there an opportunity to prioritise other vaccines instead? You mentioned that we have got contracts with other organisations, other pharmaceutical companies. But can we change our orders with those and still have a rollout in the schedule that's planned?

OMAR KHORSHID: Look, we don't know what the details of the contracts are. But there's no doubt the Government could go and buy other vaccines if the AstraZeneca vaccine, for instance, doesn't get approved. None of these vaccines, none, have actually yet been approved. And our regulator won't approve them unless they're both safe and effective and appropriate for use in Australia. And our vaccine taskforce that advises the Government won't recommend their use unless they think it's the right vaccine for Australians to take.

So I think we can be really confident in our processes; they've done us really well so far. We've got the best vaccine program in the world. And I think everyone is acutely aware of just how important this vaccine process is. And as that data continues to come in, I'm sure the program will be tweaked.

CHARLES CROUCHER: Alright. Like to hear your thoughts on some other issues this morning. Melbourne has delayed the Grand Prix, and there's concerns about the 1200 Australian Open competitors about to fly in from tomorrow. Do you feel the tennis will be safe?

OMAR KHORSHID: Look, the tennis is definitely a risk. When you're bringing in a thousand people from overseas and you see just how much COVID is out there, there's no doubt there's

a chance that you could bring it into Victoria. But I think the Government and the Tennis Australia will be absolutely aware of their responsibility to protect the health of Victorians. They are putting Victorians at risk, and they must make sure that their bubble is perfect, that they have told the players and all the staff that their behaviour in complying with the rules is absolutely critical for the success of this event and for the safety of all Victorians.

CHARLES CROUCHER: And finally, Government MP Craig Kelly's been accused of spreading misinformation about coronavirus online, including touting unproven treatments, and he said that mandating masks for children is child abuse. Should he be counselled and even condemned for those statements?

OMAR KHORSHID: Look, it's really important that our politicians, and in fact others in the community, especially at this time of a global pandemic listen to proper health advice, leave the science to the scientists, the medicine to the doctors. The interpretation of these studies that Craig Kelly's talking about is actually quite complex, and you don't just believe everything that's published. And certainly, Australians shouldn't believe everything that's published on the internet about health, because there's all sorts of crackpot ideas out there. And unfortunately, some of these ideas are coming from prominent people who should know better.

And certainly, what we'd be recommending is that Australians look to reputable sources, look to Government publications, look to big hospital websites and those sorts of things, and not worry too much about what's going out there on social media, no matter what the source is.

CHARLES CROUCHER: Dr Khorshid, a very early start for you over there, we appreciate your time this morning.

OMAR KHORSHID: No worries. Morning.

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