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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Omar Khorshid, Outlet: ABC News Breakfast, Friday, 1 April 2022

Subject: Post-budget reaction, need for political parties to fund hospitals and primary care.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: And, for his thoughts on the budget and budget reply, let's bring in now the President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Omar Khorshid in Perth. Dr Khorshid, good morning to you.

OMAR KHORSHID: Morning, Michael.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: I want to talk, more broadly, about health, obviously. But just ask you about aged care. I know it's not specifically your area, but, how important, how pressing an issue is this going to be, in your view, for the election campaign?

OMAR KHORSHID: There's no doubt that lifting the care standards in aged care is absolutely critical for the quality of life of aged care residents. But also, as we heard just before there, to protect our hospitals and to reduce the, unfortunately, too common incidence of people being sent in an ambulance from an aged care facility to a hospital emergency department, who could have been cared for in that facility. That does involve nurses, it does involve, actually, more doctors getting into aged care. And, unfortunately, we haven't seen a good enough response as yet to ensure that happens.

Now, the \$2.5 billion announced in the speech yesterday from Anthony Albanese, it's a pretty small amount of money when you compare it with the almost \$18 billion in the Government's response. So, I'm not sure how much difference that's really going to make. And, of course, a 25 per cent increase in wages, whilst sorely needed, will have a much bigger price tag than that. So, I think there's a little bit of smoke and mirrors still here, and there's an opportunity for both parties to clarify where they stand on these issues.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Okay. Looking more directly in your portfolio - health. Are you, generally, happy with what you got on that front from Josh Frydenberg on Tuesday night?

OMAR KHORSHID: I'm not sure what we got, Michael. The budget was absolutely not a health budget. It was, at least, a budget without any cuts to health and that was something that we did fear as the Government moved into a budget repair cycle. But of course, with an election around the corner, it's very difficult to cut health.

But what was missing from the budget was any sense of acknowledgement of the public hospital crisis - the fact that our hospitals are in logjam. And there's nothing in the budget that will stop those ambulances being ramped up outside public hospitals.

Similarly, in primary care, even the Government's own promised investment in reform of primary care - promised in the last election, in the 2019-20 Budget - it's been pulled out and now we have an unfunded primary care plan which the AMA and many other stakeholders back, but there's no money behind it. And unfunded plans have got this habit of just disappearing into the ether over time.

So, what we're hearing very clearly from the Prime Minister is that health's had enough spending during the pandemic. It's cost enough. There's no more for Health and there's no more for GP's, because they got, what they're saying, is \$100 million for Telehealth over four years. But compared with a budget for primary care of about \$50 billion - that \$100 million is a drop in the ocean. And, really, the Government need to take primary care reform more seriously.

More worryingly, though, we're seeing no alternative from the Opposition at this stage. They're playing a small-target strategy on many things. But on health there's been absolute silence so far from the Opposition. That makes it really hard for Australians, who we know value health, who we know are going to vote on health. We saw it in South Australia. It's really hard for them to make that call, because right now, we're not hearing anything on health from either party.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: We saw the impact health played in the recent South Australian election - it pretty much tipped the balance, and most people would agree on that. Do you see health playing a similar role in the Federal election campaign?

OMAR KHORSHID: Well, I certainly hope so. And that's the position that the AMA has taken, by going out on the front foot, seeking a change in the public hospital funding formula; seeking reform in primary care, which we're going to have more to say very shortly; funded plans to actually transform primary care into a sector that can actually look after the chronic health needs of Australians, without them needing to front up to hospitals. And of course, of an investment in preventing people getting sick in the first place. In none of these areas have we heard anywhere near enough from either party, and we're going to hold them to account to make sure that voters know where each party stands.

And so, there is a fantastic opportunity for either party to actually demonstrate their commitment to health and to show some vision, some leadership, for Australia's future. Because without that, we know we are facing incredible difficulties coming up. Not just from our ageing population, as we heard just before, but from the increasing rates of chronic disease, from the post-COVID surge in demand due to deferred care, and of course long COVID as well. You add all those things up - we're looking at a health sector that is going to be completely overburdened. And it's time that we invest in both the medium and long-term future for health in Australia.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: We'll see what both parties come up with on the health front once the election campaign proper kicks off. But, Dr Khorshid, thanks for your time this morning.

OMAR KHORSHID: Thanks, Michael.

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