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AMA

Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, *The World Today*, ABC Radio, Monday 1 May 2017

Subject: No Jab, No Pay changes

ELEANOR HALL: Parents could soon have their fortnightly welfare payments reduced if they fail to immunise their children properly. The Federal Government has announced it's revising its No Jab, No Pay program, as Stephanie Borys reports from Canberra.

REPORTER: Australia's immunisation rates are on the rise, but the Government wants the figures to climb further. Social Services Minister Christian Porter is changing the way the No Jab, No Pay policy works. He says it's about ensuring children are kept happy and healthy.

CHRISTIAN PORTER: This isn't about punishing people. If you do the right thing and get your kids immunised, absolutely no problems whatsoever. But if you are one of the small group of people who don't do that and cause safety ill-effects for other children in environments like child care, then you can and will face a penalty. And I just think that's completely and utterly fair, and it produces a result which is better health for more kids.

REPORTER: The original policy was introduced in January last year. If children didn't meet the immunisation requirements, the Government cut part or all of the Family Tax Benefit Part A supplement. That payment is worth up to \$726 per child. President of the Australian Medical Association, Dr Michael Gannon, says No Jab, No Pay saw an increase in immunisation rates.

MICHAEL GANNON: No Jab, No Pay is a success. There's another 200,000 kids that are protected as individuals, and that, in an exponential way, increases the protection afforded to other children in playgroups and schools from serious infectious disease.

REPORTER: But welfare reforms have scrapped the supplement for families earning over \$80,000 a year. It meant wealthier parents had the potential to avoid being penalised if they didn't get their children properly immunised, so the Government is changing the way the system works. From 1 July next year, the fortnightly Family Tax Benefit Part A payment will be reduced by \$28 a fortnight for every child that doesn't meet the immunisation requirements. Minister Porter says this will ensure there is just one policy in place.

CHRISTIAN PORTER: It was quite possible that you would have to have two different types of penalty regimes. So this is far simpler, a more straightforward solution.

REPORTER: The Minister denies the changes were only made due to concerns some parents could avoid penalties. He believes the revised system will be more effective.

CHRISTIAN PORTER: Most importantly, what we've been guided by is behavioural economics. And what we've seen with having a penalty at the end of year in the supplement is fantastic improvements in immunisation rates, but we think we can do even better if, where someone fails in their immunisation requirements, they feel the penalties straight away, which is in that fortnightly cycle.

REPORTER: The Australian Medical Association is welcoming the revised policy, but some other medical experts have previously raised concerns about punishing families that don't vaccinate their children. Dr Michael Gannon disagrees.

MICHAEL GANNON: I heard these comments before No Jab, No Pay was introduced, and the simple reality is that there's 210,000 extra children fully immunised to the full extent of the schedule now. So, by that measure, the Government's program is a success.

I think how much better we can do is difficult to know. We know that there is something like one to two per cent of Australian families that you will never reach - they live in a fantastic world of thinking that there's some broad conspiracy with vaccination - but what we always strive to do is to reach that three, four, five, six per cent of vaccine-hesitant parents. That involves individual doctors and nurses being respectful and careful in delivering the information. There's no doubt about the science, but it's a case of taking people with us, not purely punitive measures.

REPORTER: Minister Porter is also hopeful the revised program will see immunisation rates improve even further.

CHRISTIAN PORTER: We can never be 100 per cent sure, but I do think that that will be the case. It's certainly been designed based on the best behavioural economics science to try and make sure that we are giving disincentives, structured into the system, to ensure that people behave in a way that's in the best interests for their kids.

And ultimately the principle here is that, where the taxpayer allows for a very generous system of Family Tax Benefits, that money shouldn't be applied to families who are either making conscious decisions, or simply failing to act, and do so in a way that endangers the health of other children whose families are doing the right thing.

ELEANOR HALL: That's Social Services Minister Christian Porter, ending that report from Stephanie Borys.

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