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**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, 6PR, *Breakfast with Lisa Barnes and Geof Parry*, 3 January 2018

**Subject:** Dr Google

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**LISA BARNES:** The Australian Medical Association President, Michael Gannon, joins us now. Good morning, Michael.

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Good morning, Lisa.

**LISA BARNES:** I'm not sure if you heard that call then with Judy, but it seems she had a good experience in using Dr Google yesterday. Is that what you're finding among other patients as well?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** I think there'd be plenty of patients who would have positive experiences, and there'd be plenty of patients that are led down the garden path. I think that if you put into a search engine the basic symptoms, in my experience most patients end up diagnosing themselves with either leukaemia or a brain tumour. But if you ask for something very specific, there's some very credible and very useful health information that gives patients an idea how to proceed.

**GEOF PARRY:** Michael, I think the AMA has been concerned about Dr Google in this sense, that they've been presenting to doctors and some doctors have been getting a bit upset about it, and you're sort of saying, isn't it, that it's a bit of a fact of life now and you have to work with it?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** I think you're exactly right, Geof. We live in a digital generation. People use their smartphones and the internet for absolutely everything in life, so it's to be expected that they'll use it in regard to their health, and we know that health is one of the main reasons that people access search engines like Google. One of the reasons doctors do recoil in horror is that some of the quality of the information on the internet leaves a lot to be desired. So when a patient presents to their GP or another specialist and says they've done their own research on vaccinations and they've spent 20 minutes and that's meant to overcome hundreds, thousands of hours of research into different vaccines, that's the kind of thing that makes doctors upset. But we need to be clever enough and sensitive enough to listen to people, and often they've done part of the work for us.

**LISA BARNES:** You're right though, it is about using a little bit of common sense and being a bit specific with what you're searching for, isn't it? Because I know I've used Dr Google, and yeah, I seem to come up with about 17 serious diseases that I've got. But if you narrow it down, you can use that information for good, can't you?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** You can. I mean, some of the State Health Departments have very high-quality information that's available. I would encourage people to have a look at where the information's coming from. So, if the search engine directs them to a website of one of the learned Colleges or a State or Territory Health Department, one of the august bodies in the English-speaking world like Britain or the United States, you might get valuable information. I use Wikipedia to look up genetic conditions and rare syndromes all the time and, although I have concerns about how often some of that information's curated, overall it's extremely good. It's when people start googling individual symptoms they usually get led down the garden path.

**GEOF PARRY:** Michael, I'm wondering whether it's any different using Dr Google to, say, the sorts of things that the medical profession has had to counter in the past. So – and I'm going to get criticised for this – but, say, iridology, where people have used iridology to sort of find out what they might be suffering from, or having their auras, their colours read, those sorts of things which, in some schools of thought, these are just quackery.

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Yeah, well, you're right, Geof. We worry a lot about the quality of the health information that's out there. Where this story started- I did an interview with a journalist at the *Courier Mail* in Brisbane, and it was based on a directive from the NHS in Britain, the NHS asking patients to try Google first. Now, that represents a failing health system. We don't have that problem in Australia. We hear individual stories, but overall the statistics show that it's not hard to get an appointment to see a GP, and let's not forget that 85 per cent of GP services are bulk billed – it costs nothing. It represents, in a world where it's increasingly difficult to find value for money for people on fixed wages, a visit to your GP represents value for money like no other I know in the whole community.

**LISA BARNES:** And certainly, Michael, obviously the advice would be double check or get it confirmed by a doctor, don't just take Dr Google at face value.

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Well that's exactly right, and people should never ignore danger symptoms, and individual human beings, the parents, guardians of young children, people caring for elderly relatives, et cetera, should never hesitate to seek medical attention. The reality is that GPs and doctors in Emergency Departments do see sometimes odd and not particularly high value presentations, but we would never want a situation where someone second-guessed themselves and didn't seek health care.

**GEOF PARRY:** Yeah, is there a couple of risks – like quite serious risks – here? I mean, you can put your health at risk if you put your trust in something like Dr Google and they get it wrong, or are you just completely wasting time and wasting people's time by going down that path?

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Well, Dr Google should never, and will never, be a surrogate for a face to face consultation. There's a lot of skill in medical practice – sometimes it's unseen to patients – but there is a skill in taking a history, performing an examination, working out which tests are and aren't indicated, thinking about how you're going to interpret those tests and what your follow-up plan is. Medical care's a lot more complicated than sometimes doctors get given credit for. Looking something up on a search engine can be a useful adjunct. We do need to do better with health literacy in our community. I'd love to see more biological sciences taught in high school, but for now it's a useful tool that people can use to either give themselves reassurance or to make it clear they do need to see a doctor.

**LISA BARNES:** Michael, we appreciate your time. Thank you.

**MICHAEL GANNON:** Pleasure. Happy New Year to both of you.

**LISA BARNES:** And to you. That's Dr Michael Gannon, the AMA President.

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3 January 2018

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