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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, 6PR, Drive, 3 August 2017

Subject: National Drug Strategy

OLIVER PETERSON: Well, we proposed the question: what is Australia's biggest public health concern? What do you think it is? Is it drugs? Is it perhaps meth? Is it alcohol? Because the boss of the AMA, Michael Gannon, believes that Australian public health really needs to put its focus on alcohol abuse. Michael Gannon is of course the President of the Australian Medical Association and he joins me on Perth Live. G'day, Michael.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good afternoon, Ollie. How are you?

OLIVER PETERSON: I'm very well, Michael. The rhetoric now is about alcohol. Why is alcohol becoming Australia's biggest public health problem?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly in terms of the National Drug Strategy there's a gaping hole in not focusing on alcohol, so we welcome the discussion on methamphetamine. As you know, Western Australia wins the gold medal in Australia for methamphetamine use and abuse – and that's nothing to be proud of. And there's no question the cancer that is within communities right across our State. But if you look at overall at the total harm, the total cost to the health budget if you like, the total mortality rate, it does pale into insignificance compared to alcohol.

OLIVER PETERSON: Alright. What sort of statistics are we looking at at the moment, Michael? Is it comparing to meth, for example, what does it cost to Australian taxpayers around alcohol abuse?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, I'm always reluctant to quote some of this economic modelling, perhaps the people who produce it will disagree, but it's hard to make sense of it. But there's no question that alcohol harms cost our community tens of billions of dollars a year. Now, the reason it's a bigger problem is because a majority of adult Australians will drink. Now, the majority of that majority manage to drink overall fairly safely.

But if you look at methamphetamine use, Australia-wide it's about 1.4 per cent of the population. And although it's a horrible drug with no safe dose, it adds up to a much smaller disease burden than a drug that's used unsafely by a minority of the 60-70-80 per cent of adults that are regular drinkers.

OLIVER PETERSON: When we talk about alcohol and the amount of alcohol that Australians drink, is that what we need to be focusing on here, Michael? Is it about trying to reduce the amount of beers that somebody has, the amount of glasses of wine that somebody has? Is it about attacking it in the home, first? And about everybody's daily consumption of how many drinks they have?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think what we need to do is to focus on the two types of harms that alcohol consumption causes. So there's the harm which comes from acute consumption, especially with binge drinking, which puts people at increased risk of motor vehicle accidents, pedestrian accidents, industrial accidents. It puts people at greater risk of family violence, of violence on the streets. There's that acute cost from binge drinking and intoxication.

And then there's the chronic harms which come from long-term alcohol use. So whether that's liver disease, brain damage, and increased incidents of a number of cancers, including two of the biggest killers - breast cancer and bowel cancer – and of course, the association with

anxiety, depression, other forms of mental illness. So there are two elements to society's problem with alcohol. Both of them equally serious.

OLIVER PETERSON: We did see yesterday some data out of the UK that the Queen has four drinks per day. And under Australian standards it might be considered that she is a binge drinker – is four drinks too many Michael Gannon?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, she's certainly exceeding the safe drink limits – both proposed in Britain and Australia – and suppose at times she's got a very stressful job and many people would point to that and say well, there you go, there's an example of someone who has managed to enjoy regular drinking safely. I think the problem is that there are a lot of us who would think that we have safe drinking limits. A bit like people who think that they might be able to speed in a car or be silly enough to not vaccinate their children. You do get away with it for a period of time but if you look at it at population level – and that's what we're talking about – we're talking about population health, the National Drug Strategy. The safe drinking limits have some science behind them. And overall, the community's health would be a lot better collectively if people observed the safe drinking limits.

OLIVER PETERSON: Now, I did see something and you posted on social media actually, Michael Gannon, overnight about saying with this conversation about alcohol, you don't want to be coming across as a wowser.

MICHAEL GANNON: No. People who know me around town would know that 'chief wowser' would sit very uncomfortably with me. But I think it's appropriate that we all sit back and reflect on our drinking. And certainly when we're talking about a National Drug Strategy, this is a missed opportunity for Government to look at things that might be uncomfortable for Australians.

So, do we need to look at volumetric taxation of alcohol so that wine drinkers pay the tax that they should be? Do we need to look at investing more in public health programs? Do we need to look at how we determine licensing and where pubs are advertising on television? It's an uncomfortable conversation for many Australians. Alcohol is totally, completely inculcated in our culture, but that doesn't mean it always needs to be that way, and it doesn't mean we shouldn't ask these questions.

OLIVER PETERSON: Michael Gannon, thanks for your time on Perth Live.

MICHAEL GANNON: Alright. Pleasure, Ollie.

OLIVER PETERSON: That is the AMA President, Michael Gannon. What is Australia's biggest public health concern?

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