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**Transcript:** AMA Vice President, Dr Chris Zappala, ABC Radio National, *RN Breakfast with Fran Kelly*, Thursday, 6 June 2019

**Subject:** Influenza season

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**FRAN KELLY:** The unusually high number of flu cases in Australia this season has led to shortages of the vaccine. According to the most recent figures, there's been more than 55,000 notifications of influenza this year, and those numbers are climbing steeply. So far, at least 119 people have died from the flu, including young children and some older Australians. That's forced the Government to order 400,000 more vaccines for the private market.

Dr Chris Zappala is Vice President of the AMA. Chris Zappala, welcome to *Breakfast*.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Good morning.

**FRAN KELLY:** It's been an early start to the flu season. I myself have encountered this lack of vaccine. I've been trying to get a flu shot and can't get one till next week at the earliest. How is it that we're running out of vaccine already?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, I think it's because of the unprecedented number of cases that we're seeing at the moment. Compared to previous years, we're looking at a four to five-fold or so increase in those numbers. And so, we do our best obviously- well, the Departments do their best to make predictions on what we're going to need. But it's obviously really difficult to anticipate that sort of a spike. So, it's just unusual and that's caught us a bit unawares.

**FRAN KELLY:** Well, it's good news, I suppose, in one way, because the- you know, here on *Breakfast* and in other media outlets, they've been getting the word out that the flu is dangerous this year, get your flu shot, get it early. If we're putting out that message, you would expect there'd be some sort of coordinated effort behind to make sure the vaccines are in place.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, I think there is that coordinated effort occurring behind the scenes.

**FRAN KELLY:** [Talks over] Well, it hasn't worked though.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, there are still general practitioners through the National Immunisation Program that have stocks available. Where the particular difficulties have been have been in the private market, so the pharmacies and so on that are dispensing the Fluvax. So those people who are eligible for a free vaccine under the Commonwealth system - in other words, people over 65, with immune problems, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and so on - they can go along to their GP and, in most cases, I'm told that the GPs will still have some stocks. But as you mentioned, there are more on the way.

**FRAN KELLY:** So, when will they arrive? The Government's ordered, I think, 400,000 more vaccines for that private market. And what we mean there is so people can go to the pharmacist and have the shot. Is that going to be enough?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, we hope it will be enough, of course. I mean, remember that we've had millions and millions of vaccines through the country already and we hope it's enough. I

think we can put some trust in the epidemiologists who do this every year. Remember, what's happened here is we've got an extremely wily organism that mutates and makes things difficult. And our clinicians and public health officials I think do do a good job at trying to predict what happens. It's just been such a terrible year this year, and remember it's not just about the vaccine. We've got to do all the basic stuff as well around respiratory protection and flu protection as well.

**FRAN KELLY:** When we say it's been- you know, certainly it's an extremely wily organism but it's been a tough year. Some specialists say this year's strain of the flu is unusually brutal. Is that how you see it as a doctor? And does that suggest that it's likely that this flu season has not just come early, it's likely to be particularly serious, a particularly bad one?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** I don't think we have an indication that the rest of the year is going to necessarily play out as badly as the first part of the year has gone. That's definitely- I don't think- that doesn't follow at all. The mortality attached to this flu - and unfortunately as you pointed out, there have been some people who have succumbed and passed away from the flu - the mortality is no higher than with previous flus. It just seems to be spreading a lot more easily through communities. So, from that point of view it has been more difficult. And that relates to the nature of the virus, and the way that it can mutate and slip through our immune defences a little more easily.

**FRAN KELLY:** Okay. Well, that's good news, I suppose, in one way. One thing about the figures this year, the death toll may not be higher yet but there does seem to be a spike in South Australia. It's recorded the highest number of flu cases. The death toll there's reached 37. South Australia's had nearly 17,000 cases compared to 1400 for the same period last year. Any clues about what's going on in South Australia?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** No, not at all. That's a really curious finding, actually, and it's not at all clear why that is the case. It's interesting actually. The reason flu circulates more in winter is probably not because we're cold, as some people believe, but it's actually because we probably spend more time in closer confines. We huddle together more. And so whether there's an issue around that or not is obviously a point of discussion and conjecture. But it's not particularly obvious or clear at all why the poor South Australians have had such a bad year compared to everyone else.

**FRAN KELLY:** Yeah. As I say, I was shopping around trying to get a flu shot this week from one of the chemists in the area and nobody has them, bit unclear about when they were going to get them. Do you have any information about when those 400,000 vaccines will be made available in the private market?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** I'm so sorry, I don't have that information, but obviously we're hoping that it will be as soon as possible.

**FRAN KELLY:** Okay. And just again, the message for people who are most at risk - people over 65 and which other group are eligible still to go under the National Immunisation Programme to the GP where there is vaccine available?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Yes, correct. So over 65s, people who have problems with their immune systems - people who have chronic respiratory illnesses, for example, or no spleen - people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, and pregnant women - they're the main groups, and those people should pop along to their regular general practitioner and get vaccinated if they haven't already.

But just to underline, remember, please, please, please, remember if you're unwell, stay home from work. You don't need to be a hero because you don't want to give it to other people. And be really good with your respiratory health. Watch where you cough and sneeze, wash your hands and those sorts of things, because the simple measures like that definitely do make a difference as well. So, we've got to be particular about those in this difficult time.

**FRAN KELLY:** Okay, Chris, thank you very much for joining us.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** You're welcome.

**FRAN KELLY:** Dr Chris Zappala is the Vice President of the AMA. And just to make sure that you've got that message, for many of us, we can't go to the chemist near us at the moment. A lot of chemists have run out of the flu vaccine. More is coming next week, I understand. But GPs still have them, so if you are eligible under the National Immunisation Programme - if you're over 65, if you've got a chronic respiratory disease or some kind of immune issue, if you're Indigenous Australian, if you're pregnant - you can still go to the doctor and get a flu shot. It's available now, so don't hold off by the sounds of it.

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