

Australian Medical Association Limited

ABN 37 008 426 793

42 Macquarie Street, Barton ACT 2600: PO Box 6090, Kingston ACT 2604
 Telephone: (02) 6270 5400 Facsimile (02) 6270 5499
 Website : <http://www.ama.com.au/>



Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, 3AW, Friday, 7 July 2017

Subjects: Sugar tax

TONY JONES: I know sugar tax almost on a daily basis seems to be on the agenda - and so it should be in a lot of ways. Keen on your views on that – 9690 0693 1313 32. Should we have to pay more because some people can't control their sugar intake? It has taken a bit of a twist here because a ground-breaking study has found that sugary drinks boost the risk of getting Type 2 diabetes. But now it's found it doesn't matter whether you're skinny or overweight. So if you have a Coke, a lemonade, a Red Bull or I don't know, even a Boost Juice once a day, your risk of Type 2 diabetes absolutely skyrockets.

Joining us on the line now is the president of the Australian Medical Association, Michael Gannon. Good morning, Michael.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning, Tony.

TONY JONES: Do we need this sugar tax?

MICHAEL GANNON: I think we need a sugar tax - the AMA has called for it in the past. We're not calling for a ban on these kind of drinks but we know that price signals work. And this is further evidence of the harms that these kind of drinks cause. Now we're talking about drinks that contain sugar at rates, you know, sometimes more than ten times what's available in nature. It's not surprising that that will cause things like Type 2 diabetes.

TONY JONES: This is the thing that gets me because when you say a sugar tax, like how much are you advocating?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well whatever we need to do it needs to be large enough that it is a price signal to disincentivise people to use it - and if we could use that money to help fund the inevitable future costs of dealing with people with things like Type 2 diabetes, well then we offset some of the costs of people getting these conditions ending up in the health system.

TONY JONES: Yeah, and that's where I agree. So I'm sort of having a bob each way here - because whilst I agree with that it does make me a little angry because I think to myself at what point do we stop being told what we can do?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, I don't think we should be talking about banning these drinks altogether ...

TONY JONES: [Interrupts] Well, you virtually are though by- I mean it's just a nice way of saying you are banning it by saying you're going to price it so much that it's effectively going to stop people from being able to buy it anyway from a monetary point of view.

MICHAEL GANNON: If we tripled the price of a so-called healthy juice drink or if we tripled the cost of flavoured milk - and I'm not necessarily advocating a tax at that level, and we make people think twice about why it costs that much or make them think instead maybe I'll get a glass of water out of the tap, which is a lot healthier and is far more likely to quench your thirst, then you might change behaviours. Now we're going to get the same arguments that we got from government over the past 50 years on tobacco; too hard; don't want to

infringe on personal freedoms, we'll get the same arguments from industry saying look, it's not that bad. You might even hear them tell lies like the tobacco industry's done for 60 years. We just need to change those behaviours and it's not simply a matter of personal choice when it's the taxpayer who ends up paying when people have a stroke, have a heart attack, need their stomach stapled, need all these things done because they're overweight obese or even this evidence suggests that you can get sick without being overweight or obese.

TONY JONES: But why should the people suffer who are doing the right thing - put that in inverted commas - those are the people that might have one can of full strength Coke a day. I mean is that too much - one can a day?

MICHAEL GANNON: No it's not and ...

TONY JONES: [Interrupts] No, okay. So if there's a person that has one can a day and suddenly the price of that can of Coke - it's their little vice if you like - suddenly skyrockets?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well I don't think there's a proposal to tax it beyond the means of someone to make that individual choice. We've had Coca-Cola for 130-odd years. The recipe has changed and some people are able to use it as it was designed, as a tonic - heaven forbid in a 150 ml can as a mixer. But when you see kids in pushchairs sitting sucking on 600ml bottles, it makes me ill. These are not appropriate day-by-day choices. They are absolutely laden with sugar - they make people sick, and we can use a price signal through taxation to not only support the cost of the health system but to reduce consumption. People can still make choices. It will just cost them more.

TONY JONES: Yeah okay. So how much is it costing us from a health point of view?

MICHAEL GANNON: Literally billions. We have- I mean what this latest new study talks about specifically is sugar sweetened beverages and Type 2 diabetes. The two modern epidemics are diabetes and overweight obesity. Now they're not- there's a substantial overlap. You're far more likely to become a Type 2 diabetic if you're overweight or obese but it's a complex disease with multiple genetic and environmental factors. What is new in this study is the suggestion that you can be at high risk of getting Type 2 diabetes even if you're of normal weight. Now that's highly biologically plausible. If you're exposing your body to a blood sugar level that's 20 times what you get from eating an orange or from eating a natural food stuff, well then it's plausible that that would change the way your body reacts to insulin, reacts to other sugars. This finding is of concern. We don't believe that a sugar tax is a silver bullet that will fix every problem in the health system but it's one of a number of measures we need to look at.

TONY JONES: So you may have alluded to this a little earlier on, but could we not start making the more healthier options cheaper?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, we already do that. I mean water from the tap is less than a cent a glass ...

TONY JONES: Yeah, but as someone phoned up earlier and told us that it costs more to actually buy water than it does buy petrol at a servo.

MICHAEL GANNON: Yes, and of course the soft drink manufacturers have recognised the falling consumption and that's why they're some of the biggest providers of bottled water going around. That's an issue that we need to look at - exactly why is bottled water so expensive and

of course we recognise the fact that not everywhere that people go do they have access to a tap. But we can use taxation measures to change behaviour. We shouldn't ban these things. People are allowed to make their own individual choices. But introducing a price signal will make a lot of people think twice. It's been shown in other areas like tobacco to reduce consumption and we need to look at our attitude to some highly processed foods; high in sugar, high in salt, high in fat, and the industries behind them is at least similar to what we've been told by tobacco over 50 years.

TONY JONES: Alright, nice to talk to you, Michael.

MICHAEL GANNON: Alright, pleasure, Tony.

7 July 2017

CONTACT: John Flannery 02 6270 5477 / 0419 494 761
 Maria Hawthorne 02 6270 5478 / 0427 209 753

Follow the AMA Media on Twitter: http://twitter.com/ama_media

Follow the AMA President on Twitter: <http://twitter.com/amapresident>

Follow *Australian Medicine* on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/amaausmed>

Like the AMA on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/AustralianMedicalAssociation>