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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, with Geoff Hutchison, ABC Radio Perth, Tuesday 7 November 2017

Topics: Health of asylum seekers

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Michael Gannon, good morning.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning, Geoff.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Why do you feel the need to buy into the Manus situation?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, we're interested in the health services available to this wretched group of men. There is no question that the situation they're in puts them at high risk of mental health problems, and like any group of people, they have their own physical health needs as well. We won't be commenting on the immigration aspects; we're not citizenship experts, we're not immigration experts, but the AMA's full of health experts and we're concerned about the health of these men.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: What would the AMA like to see? Would they like to see these men moved? Would they like assurances that the health of these men is secure?

MICHAEL GANNON: It's not appropriate for us to comment on the immigration arrangements, but one of the things that we are driven by is our very clear medical ethics on the topic, and the very clear subject of Australian law. People seeking asylum are entitled to the legal protection of the Australian state. People under that protection are entitled to an appropriate standard of healthcare.

What we've been asking for, for some time now is independent verification of those standards of healthcare. We used to have a degree of transparency about the healthcare they were receiving. I had a relationship with the previous chief medical officer of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection; he resigned and we've lost that openness where we were able to advocate on the behalf of individuals – whether they be on Manus Island or Nauru or elsewhere – behind the scenes, without great fanfare, looking after the healthcare of individuals. We've lost that relationship. That's a great shame.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: So what do you know of the mental health and welfare of those on Manus?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly, from first principles we have great concerns, and I think the thing that would feed those mental health issues is the great uncertainty that these men would feel. They are in limbo. They're in a bigger political game. They are innocent victims. Most of them are there because they were conned by people smugglers; they're now part of a bigger international debate on what we do with people like this.

As you know, there are literally tens of millions of people around the world who are either stateless or they aren't- they've been found to be genuine refugees or they are seeking asylum. These problems aren't going to go away.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: My guest this morning is the AMA President Michael Gannon.

You're at pains not to be critical of government, of politicians, but when we look at the responses from our politicians, be they the Government, be they the Labor Opposition, when we look at the advocacy of those supporting the cause of these people, are you finding it hard to get a sense of what is really going on here because there is such polarisation of the debate?

MICHAEL GANNON: You're exactly right, Geoff, and that is the major problem. Now, it's not appropriate that Australia's doctors start making opinions about a New Zealand solution or an American solution; that means we're talking beyond our expertise, but what we do know is that there's great uncertainty – the living conditions for these people, remote from family supports, from culture, et cetera – a great uncertainty about what their future is in life, potentially missing the mental health advantages that come from engagement and employment.

These people are in an extremely difficult situation. We don't know what they're being promised by refugee advocates. We simply don't know what they've been told by Government. What we would say is let's have complete transparency about the situation that these men are in. Let's have a real, independent look at the healthcare they're receiving and then we can make honest judgements. But Australian doctors, when they hear reports of people lacking access to clean water, to food, to the medicines they need, of course they're going to be concerned.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Just to be very clear: you're not saying you want them brought to Australia, you're not saying they should go to New Zealand, but you want a very clear picture of their health and mental fitness so real decisions, appropriate decisions, can be made about their healthcare.

MICHAEL GANNON: That's exactly right. It's not appropriate for me or anyone else representing Australian doctors to start to pretend that we have expertise in matters of immigration, but we are health experts and we have great concerns about the mental health and physical health needs of this group of men. If the Government has nothing to hide about the services afforded these men, then let's have a genuine, independent voice saying that the living conditions are appropriate. Let's move away from some of the claims of refugee advocates, let's move away from the Government saying: look, it's all okay, she'll be right.

We have significant concerns. We have unverified and potentially unverifiable reports about hardship. I think it's up to the Government to assure the Australian people that this group of men that enjoy their legal protection, that they are receiving an appropriate standard of care.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Michael Gannon, thank you very much for talking to me.

MICHAEL GANNON: Pleasure, Geoff.

GEOFF HUTCHISON: Michael Gannon is the President of the AMA.

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