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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, ABC Radio Sydney, 8 January 2018

Subjects: War on sugar

SIMON MARNIE: When you're at the supermarket trying to pay for your groceries and your darling little angel eyeballs the chocolate bars, right at their level, the sweets and the chewing gum, Australian doctors feel your pain. Dr Michael Gannon is the President of the Australian Medical Association, and they're calling for some big changes to the availability of sugar. Certainly over the holiday break, we saw *That Sugar Film*, which is a documentary looking at the amount of sugar in our food.

Dr Michael Gannon joins us on the line. Good morning to you.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning, Simon.

SIMON MARNIE: What's new in your 2018 Position Statement, because we've heard the calls for a sugar tax before?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, we've maintained those calls and we're going to need to maintain pressure on both the Government and the Opposition, who went a large way to ruling it out yesterday. But we see this as comparable to the war on tobacco. We think that, bit by bit, we need to change behaviours. We need to drag Government to action with a variety of measures. One of the easiest to implement, and one of the simplest to call for, is a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. We don't think that's the silver bullet to fix our obesity crisis, but it's certainly part of the jigsaw.

SIMON MARNIE: When you see *That Sugar* doco, you realise how insidious sugar is across the board.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, it is, and of course it's added to processed foods across the board, and to make processed foods tasty, they do need to be high in sugar, they do need to be high in salt, they do need to be high in trans fats, and potentially all three. So this is not as simple as saying it's just about sugar-sweetened, carbonated beverages. It's not as simple as just being fast foods. It's the highly-processed foods that constitute a proportion of a lot of people's diets and sadly, for a lot of Australians, a majority of their diet.

SIMON MARNIE: Awareness seems to be a significant factor, more so than banning or taxing; wouldn't that be - an education campaign - be a good way to go as well?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, that's very important and, for example, if the Government did introduce a sugar tax, then we would not say that that should be yet another tax grab, it should be hypothecated for spending in health education programs, then it's a double win. You not only get the deterrent that price signals are, and have been, in other parts of the world that have introduced a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, but then you use those funds to educate the public, to help them make better decisions about the food they put in their mouths and in the mouths of their children.

SIMON MARNIE: We're looking at the sugar in our everyday life. Dr Michael Gannon is the President of the Australian Medical Association. The Government has said it won't support a tax on sugary drinks. A spokesman for the Health Minister said the Government wouldn't play a part in increasing the grocery bills for families. What do you think of that response?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I'm no economist, but I've read economic modelling on this subject, and we've got the examples from tobacco. Over time, this would reduce consumption. So, over time this would reduce the burden on householders.

And of course, the real reason we're in this space is the negative impact that these drinks have on people's health, and there will be other benefits that will accrue. People will lead healthier lives, there will be less health spending, and that will be true, both for individuals and the community as a whole. This is not the whole answer to the obesity problem, but it's part of the solution.

SIMON MARNIE: And what impact do you think this will have on businesses? Because I can imagine whilst the big corporations who make the sugary drinks can weather a tax of some form, for the smaller businesses it would be an impost.

MICHAEL GANNON: That's true, and we need to consider the impact across society, but people will always reach for a drink when they're out and about, they're at work, they're going to buy their lunch, they're at a concert or a sporting event. We just want to assist them in making healthier choices. The amount of hidden sugar in these drinks - and not just the obvious culprits, but some of the juice drinks that are marketed as being healthier - we're talking 15-20 teaspoons of sugar.

SIMON MARNIE: Woah.

MICHAEL GANNON: Now, you wouldn't dream of putting 15 teaspoons of sugar on your breakfast cereal. There is no way you would add 20 teaspoons of sugar to your coffee or your tea in the morning, and yet that is what people are consuming in a hidden way.

And not only are simple sugars so easily soluble in water, in these drinks, so they can hide so easily, they're just as rapidly metabolised to fat, and that's the real problem we've got here. They are very, very efficiently metabolised to fats, and that is part of the reason that they contribute to the obesity burden on our health system.

SIMON MARNIE: We were watching that film, *That Sugar Film*, which is a documentary looking at how much sugar is in our system and the high sugar diet. And we would like to think in our household we were a low sugar household. But then when you look at the yoghurts - as you mentioned - the fruit drinks, all these areas where the label doesn't really tell you the true story.

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, a very good guide is to try and make as much of your diet food that's presented in the way nature intended it. So, for example we've seen campaigns in the past that have demonised hens' eggs as a food, and we from time to time hear people talk about the negatives of consuming lean meat. At least those food stuffs are presented in the way that nature intended.

But you can be sure if you buy anything out of a packet, it's had something added to it to make it tastier. That's how it works, that's how the food industry works. You are either consuming something with additional fat, additional salt, or additional sugar to make it tastier. And we just want to change those kind of behaviours over a generation.

SIMON MARNIE: How much of it is sugar, and then when you compare it to artificial sweeteners? I saw an ad at the cinema yesterday for one of the leading soft drink companies, who made a big thing about no sugar, yet the sweetener must come from an artificial source. Are they just as bad?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think that overall, replacing the - if you will - full-strength sugar beverages with the sugar-free alternatives is probably better for your health. Now, of course, over the years we saw an emergence of data on the risks of aspartame, an association with bladder cancer. You've got to be careful with consumption of all of these. And ideally people should be consuming water as their preferred drink, heaven forbid, even out of the tap.

Now, that's not to say again that people can't consume these beverages from time to time. If you want to have one every now and then, then the tax impost is not going to ruin your lives. But if I thought there was any measure that would stop the family pulling out the 2-litre or 3-litre bottle for the family, or I must say, what I find the personally deplorable sight of a toddler in a pushchair sucking on a 600ml bottle of carbonated soft drink -

SIMON MARNIE: [Talks over] Oh yeah.

MICHAEL GANNON: - which should never happen, then that would be a good thing. So, we will continue to lobby the Government, we will continue to lobby the Opposition. We don't see this as the only measure. Our Nutrition Statement spans a whole range of areas. But what we need to do is to overcome the changes of the past 40 years. Throughout the developed world and the developing world, we've seen an explosion in the proportion of citizens that are overweight or obese, and our health system's going to be paying that price for years to come. We just want to turn the ship around.

SIMON MARNIE: Dr Michael Gannon, thanks for joining us.

MICHAEL GANNON: Pleasure, Simon.

SIMON MARNIE: Dr Michael Gannon is the President of the Australian Medical Association.

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