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**Speaking Notes**

**Launch of *The Science of Immunisation: Questions and Answers***

**Parliament House, Canberra**

**Monday 10 October 2016**

**AMA President Dr Michael Gannon**

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**Immunisation Saves Lives**

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Many thanks to our Health Minister, Sussan Ley, for officiating at today's launch.

The Minister and the Government have worked hard to promote vaccination in the Australian population and keep the rates high.

I'd like to also thank Professor Andrew Holmes and the Academy of Science for inviting the AMA to be involved with the launch of this important publication.

We were involved with the original publication launch a few years ago.

Parliament House is the place where issues of national importance are discussed and decisions made.

Immunisation is one of the most important public health measures protecting Australians, so the venue is highly appropriate.

I am honoured to be speaking alongside the likes of Professor Holmes, Laureate Professor of the School of Chemistry at the University of Melbourne, an internationally recognised and awarded scientist.

It is an honour, too, to be in the company of Professor Peter Doherty, who is recognised, quite rightly, as an Australian Living Treasure. He is a legend of the science of immunisation.

And I am pleased to meet Dr Mike Freeland, paediatrician and the new Labor Member for Macarthur – and living proof that immunisation is very much a bipartisan issue.

Routine infant and child immunisation is a proven, cost effective public health measure that reduces the spread of communicable disease.

It provides protection for the individual, as well as the wider community.

As the peak doctor organisation and a key public health advocate, the AMA is a vocal supporter of routine childhood immunisation.

Doctors are highly trusted. As the predominant provider of childhood immunisations, we are often sought out by parents who wish to discuss health issues impacting their children, including routine immunisation.

Doctors hold *The Science of Immunisation: Questions and Answers* booklet in very high regard.

Not only because it is produced by an authoritative and respected body like the Academy of Science, but also because it provides parents with easy to understand material about immunisation.

Parents can read the material at their own pace. They have time to consider all of the information that it contains, and come back to it time and time again.

Vaccines are safe. Vaccines save lives.

Prior to being included on the Immunisation Schedule in Australia, new vaccines are carefully examined.

Routine monitoring of vaccine safety also continues over time.

In many countries, including Australia, immunisation programs have achieved such success that many people are unaware of the serious health complications that can arise, permanently disabling or killing those infected by vaccine-preventable diseases.

This may be contributing to an apathy among some parents about the need to vaccinate their children.

The rates of childhood immunisation in Australia are fairly high.

According to the Australian Childhood Immunisation Register, we have:

- 93 per cent of children fully immunised at 12 months;
- 90.7 per cent of children fully immunised at 24 months (2 years); and
- 92.9 per cent of children fully immunised at 60 months (5 years).

These rates are good, but there is no room for complacency.

Diseases such as Measles are highly transmissible.

To achieve high levels of protections to the vulnerable, we need to achieve vaccination coverage of between 90 and 95 per cent of the entire population (not just children).

One aspect that national coverage figures overlook is the consistent discrepancy in childhood immunisation rates in some geographic areas.

Serious discrepancies in immunisation rates occur depending on where people live.

We see that some geographic areas - such as Murrumbidgee, Hunter-New England and the Central Coast in NSW, and the ACT - had high rates of immunisation coverage among one, two and five years olds (all well over 90 per cent).

But then we also saw areas such as the Gold Coast, Western Sydney, and the North Coast of NSW with much lower coverage rates - rates as low as 86 and 87 per cent.

These lower rates are unlikely to afford the individual or the community with protection from outbreaks of vaccine-preventable disease.

The NHPA immunisation reports started in 2013, and have certainly highlighted the discrepancies.

In response, we have seen campaigns such as *No Jab No Play* and *Keep Our Kids Safe* at the State level, which encourage all parents to immunise their children, for their own health, as well as the health of the community.

At the start of this year, the Federal Government introduced the *No Jab No Pay* policy.

The AMA supported this proposal because it had the potential to increase immunisation coverage rates in problem areas.

And it does seem to be working. According to Government figures, almost 6,000 children who had previously been registered as conscientious objectors have now been immunised.

More than 148,000 children who had fallen behind the schedule are now up to date with their immunisations.

It is essential that we continue to monitor immunisation coverage across the nation.

*No Jab No Pay* may have minimal impact on families in wealthier parts of Australia.

Some of these areas have very low immunisation rates. We must think about measures that will increase immunisations in these areas, too.

One of the reasons for vaccine hesitancy or vaccine refusal is the proliferation of material that seeks to link vaccination with ill health.

While thoroughly disproven, we still see people linking the MMR vaccine to Autism. This is genuinely troubling.

This claim has been thoroughly and comprehensively disproven.

The first clinical signs of autism commonly occur in the second year of life, at a time when MMR vaccine is usually given, but there is no link.

So we must do all we can to reassure parents about the safety of vaccines.

Various web blogs and films like *Vaxxed* have the potential to undermine our national programs of immunisation.

As I said at the time, I appreciate that many films are designed to be edgy and question our thinking. I don't have a problem with that.

What I do have a problem with is the potential for vaccine hesitant parents to see this film, feel that their concerns or fears have been confirmed, choose not to vaccinate, and then have their child ending up in an intensive care unit, possibly with life-long complications from a vaccine-preventable disease.

This is not a matter of art, but a matter of life. Small decreases in immunisation rates can have big consequences.

There is also a possibility that this material increases fear among parents who have already vaccinated their children. I can tell you from experience that being a parent is hard enough.

It is our job as doctors to reassure parents when they present with fears or concerns about immunisation.

The Academy's booklet will help us with this work.

It explains the science behind vaccination and highlights its benefits.

I congratulate the Academy of Science on the booklet, and hope it finds its way into every Australian home.

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