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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, 2UE, *Healthy Living with Ross Walker*, Sunday 11 February 2018

Subject: Excess of sugar in the Australian diet

ROSS WALKER: The major reason food tastes good is related to the content of fat, salt, spices and of course, the ubiquitous sugar. But surely what we put in our mouth should be a personal choice, not dictated to by government bodies, expert organisations, or health professionals. Or should it? So many of the decisions we make are bad for our bodies, and the personal and societal consequences are often very far reaching, leading to significant economic and personal cost directly related to poor health outcomes.

Dr Michael Gannon is well-known as the President of the AMA, and I'm delighted to say he's on the line. Good evening, Michael.

MICHAEL GANNON: Good evening, Ross.

ROSS WALKER: Now, Michael, can you tell our listeners; what are the health risks associated with an excess intake of sugar?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, excess sugar is converted to fat, and we're often talking about foodstuffs that are relatively nutritionally poor in that they don't give us anything more than the energy you get from burning sugar. Our major concern with sugar and its addition to processed foods and to drinks is its part of its contribution to the problem we have with overweight and obesity in our society.

ROSS WALKER: No, I don't think there's any doubt about that, and also the overweight and obesity leading to the major epidemic of the 21st century metabolic syndrome and 'diabesity', the increasing rates of diabetes we're seeing. So when we think of sugar, we typically relate this to the stuff we add to tea, coffee, or put in the breakfast cereal, but ignore the hidden sources. Can you explain how widespread sugar is in our foods?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think your introduction was spot on. There are various foodstuffs that, if you like, have to be made to taste better. Now, you've got the example of airline food which has got a lot of salt in it, because your tastebuds don't work as well at altitude. But most of the other areas relate to the discretionary choices that we make. So, the processed foods that line our supermarket aisles, fast foods, restaurant foods, anything which involves the discretionary spend, the manufacturers go out of their way to make it taste really good.

And in your introduction, you pointed to the three main areas; the addition of sugar, the addition of salt, and the addition of various forms of fats. Now, I'm glad you raised the point about sugar, as you add it to a cup of tea or a cup of coffee. Many of us will drink our tea or coffee without sugar, many more would have one teaspoon, some maybe two. But when we call for a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, we're talking about drinks that have 15, 20, sometimes closer to 30 teaspoons of sugars, well and truly hidden, dissolved - as glucose does very easily in water - and people just don't realise that they're putting something that's particularly bad for their body in, not only as an occasional choice, but on a regular basis.

ROSS WALKER: And what they also don't realise is that the studies are now showing, with especially sugar-sweetened drinks but even with the artificially sweetened drinks as well, that

if you have one can of one of those things a day, you increase your risk for diabetes up to 50 per cent, not to mention the effect on osteoporosis, on your teeth, behavioural abnormalities in kids, and the cola-based drinks increase risk for cancer. And we're allowing these things to be sold in shops.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, that's where our call for a tax on sugar-sweetened beverages comes from. It's designed to change behaviours. We have a situation now where it's often cheaper to purchase one of these drinks than it is to purchase water. Of course, they are promoted and prioritised. They're the default option in the fast food restaurant meals that are directly marketed to children. They are pushed at cinemas, et cetera. I went back to the movies yesterday, and it never makes me particularly happy to see the 800ml flask of drink. It's probably the only instance in which people would drink a volume of that size. So ...

ROSS WALKER: [Interrupts] Which is where you're getting up to your 30 teaspoons of sugar.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, that's right. And even some drinks that are marketed as being particularly healthy - the juices, especially from the chains. There's no doubting the health benefits of consuming substantial amounts of fruit and vegetables, but when you juice them you lose so much of the benefits in the fibre. You lose some of the other micronutrients in them. Those juices are often absolutely packed with sugar as well. And flavoured milk is another one, where people probably just don't realise exactly how much sugar they're loading into their bodies.

ROSS WALKER: But should we just be calling for a sugar tax on the sugar-sweetened beverages? What about all of the takeaway foods and a lot of the breakfast cereals? These things are loaded with sugar as well.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think in your introduction as well you brought up perhaps the main opposition to this, you know, why can't people make their own choices? Is this the "here we go again with the Medical Association promoting the nanny state"? But the truth is that we have a problem. We've seen a- and it's no exaggeration to call it an explosion in the rate of overweight, obesity, not just in Australia, throughout the developed world- throughout the developing world. Over the past 40 years, we've seen a failure of self regulation when it comes to industry and, collectively as a population, we've seen a failure of people to dictate exactly what it is they put in their own mouth.

ROSS WALKER: And look, we all probably cynically know the reason why the Government isn't implementing the tax - there's a little thing called votes. But what do you think the real reason behind the opposition to the taxes? I would have thought it was logical.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, as a rule governments usually like new taxes and if they can blame it on someone else they'll normally go for it. Now we've got a sugarcane industry in Australia, we've got various forms of agriculture; we've got the National Party with their predominantly rural constituency in power at the moment. We don't deny the politics and we think that this is going to be a significant fight. The comparisons with the tobacco industry are appropriate ...

ROSS WALKER: [Talks over] Yep, absolutely.

MICHAEL GANNON: ... Industry will fight this, they will use sophisticated and less sophisticated lobbying techniques, they'll go directly to our elected representatives, they will, in a sophisticated way, use the traditional media and new media to make their arguments. But

the distinction with tobacco is important because we're talking about substances, if you take them very occasionally they're unlikely to harm you. But the unhappy fact is that heavily processed foods, sugar-sweetened beverages, are a substantial contributor to overweight/obesity and it is not simply the case that individuals can make their own decisions because, as you know, you're a cardiologist, you see the downstream effects of the damage to small blood vessels. I'm an obstetrician, I see the impacts of overweight/obesity in worse outcomes for pregnant women and their babies. So every single doctor is seeing the impact of obesity in their practice. It is no exaggeration to describe it as the public health emergency of our time.

ROSS WALKER: And, Michael, can I just reinforce a point you made, and you said: if people did these things occasionally. But the figures show that up to 50 per cent of children and young- children, teenagers and young adults, are having on average one sugar-sweetened drink per day and that is directly related to so many poor health outcomes. If the Government is going to put a tax and a ban on cigarette advertising and a tax on cigarettes, I agree with you entirely we should be taxing - and also banning advertising where children are being exposed to this nonsense - and I think we just have to keep the fight going.

ROSS WALKER: We have to, and the statistics are troubling. These should not be routine or regular choices for children or for adults. Once the adult brain matures, it's more able to discern positive and negative messages, but the fact is that children, teenagers, and even young adults aren't always able to make the right choices. This is not about introducing yet another layer of nanny state intervention. We've got a problem here, we need to be sophisticated in how we deal with it.

ROSS WALKER: That's great stuff. Well, that's Dr Michael Gannon, the President of the AMA and I thank you very much for being on the show tonight, Michael.

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