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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, Radio National, *RN Breakfast with Tom Tilley*, Tuesday, 14 January 2020

Subject: Hazardous smoke haze and long-term health implications

TOM TILLEY: First, let's go to Melbourne, which is experiencing hazardous smoke haze today. The city's shrouded in thick smoke as bushfires continue to burn in East Gippsland and the North East. The Environment Protection Authority's Air Watch website this morning showed air pollutions were hazardous across many parts of the city. It follows a prediction by NASA that haze from the bushfires will have circled the globe and return back to Australian skies in the coming days - incredible.

Tony Bartone is the President of the Australian Medical Association, and he joins me this morning from Melbourne. Tony Bartone, welcome back to Breakfast. What's it like out there today where you are?

TONY BARTONE: It's pretty hazy and breathability is down to pretty poor levels, and you can feel it and you can see it and you can taste it in the air. So, yeah, the message clearly to anyone out there is that if you don't need to be out there, stay indoors, and to follow the precautions as we've clearly been saying on many different media outlets over the last few weeks during this unprecedented time.

TOM TILLEY: So why do you give that advice? What is the immediate impact of exercising and breathing in that kind of smoke?

TONY BARTONE: Okay. So, we need to be very clear about the effects, both short-term and more extensive afterwards and that. For average healthy Australians, you'll get some irritation to either the nose, the sinuses, the eyes, the back of the throat, a bit of a cough, a bit of congestion, sniffles, but as soon as the haze clears up, it will mean those symptoms will abate.

The problem is obviously if you've got pre-existing respiratory conditions, asthma, pre-existing cardiac conditions, if you're pregnant, if you're elderly, if you're young children, the haze contains very, very small fine particles, less than 2.5 micron in size. That's several orders of magnitude smaller than a strand of hair, and so basically those little particles can get down quite deep into your lungs, past the normal defences that the lung airways have, and irritate and create havoc down in the respiratory tract, especially if you've got pre-existing conditions. They can be absorbed into the bloodstream, and that's how they exacerbate cardiac conditions as well.

The problem is that, for a small group of Australians who've yet to be diagnosed as having asthma, as having underlying respiratory conditions, this is their first encounter, their first challenge, and of course they will be unfamiliar with those conditions of chest tightness, of difficulty breathing, of wheezing, and may not seek medical attention in an immediate manner, which only creates further immediate risk to their health.

TOM TILLEY: Tony, some parts of Australia have been experiencing this bushfire smoke since September, so what are the longer-term impacts of living with that kind of pollution?

TONY BARTONE: And this is where we start to struggle ourselves as health authorities, because the depth and the amount of knowledge that we have, specifically in terms of the dense and continued exposure to this kind of smoke haze, this kind of smoke-affected air quality, is pretty limited. We know we've got studies - the firies at the front line have done an amazing job this season and continue to do so, and at the end of each season they get an extensive medical. That gives us some of the information about the more medium-term effects, you might say, after the long, hot season.

But in terms of long-term effects to people who are sensitive or have existing illnesses, we need to get more data, and we need to be very much more prepared in the coming years about what is obviously being asserted by many as the new norm.

TOM TILLEY: What about the short-term data? Do you think we need better, more up-to-the-minute, and more localised monitoring of air quality in our cities?

TONY BARTONE: It's clear that - and especially in my role over the last few months travelling around various parts of the country, it's been that various cities have been more affected at different times, different parts of Australia obviously having different challenges with the smoke, and obviously the bushfire-ravaged towns of south-eastern Australian in particular have had to deal with this for many, many weeks if not months.

We do need to have local information about the conditions and the air quality, the wind - all of these factors are very important in terms of managing, and that information needs to be shared in a timely matter with not only just the community but with all the people, right from emergency service personnel, right down through to the medical authorities, the GPs in the towns who are dealing with the effects of this on the local communities constantly, day after day.

TOM TILLEY: Okay. So, ideally, how would that system work? Would you like to see monitors in every suburb giving information on the hour? How would you like to see that rolled out, and how much information would you like to be conveyed to the public?

TONY BARTONE: It's not for me to prescribe the location and the number of sensors and devices and how that is actually collated. What we do know is that we, as a community, need to be better informed and better supported during these times, and having much more clearer ability to disseminate messages, disseminate that information, and that information we should be able to get at a much more local and regional level, rather than having to put out blanket statements which sometimes lack the immediacy because you think: on this day, it doesn't really affect me, but then the next day, it does. So, we need to have some clarity in that respect.

TOM TILLEY: Yeah. I think especially for people that want to get back into their exercise routine, they want up-to-the-minute information on whether it's a good idea or not to go out cycling or running or even swimming.

Just lastly, Tony, in September last year, the AMA joined other health organisations around the world, including the American Medical Association and the British Association, in recognising climate change as a health emergency. Do you see the current crisis as an example of that kind of health emergency?

TONY BARTONE: What is clear is that, in some way or in some part or shape or form, there has been a contribution to the current situation. But what's more important is that we need to understand that obviously, as the Prime Minister has said, our climate is changing. We need to be ahead of the game and understand the science, and understand what are the preparations and the learnings, especially out of this season. What can we do better into the next year and beyond to prepare us for the impact of managing bushfire and its after-effects? What can we do better in terms of disaster planning? What can we do in disaster response, and how can we ensure that we minimise the ongoing health effects of situations like we're currently in?

TOM TILLEY: Tony Bartone, thanks for your time.

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