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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon, ABC 666, 17 August 2016

Subjects: School milk, fluoride, medical workforce and Medicare freeze

PHILIP CLARK: The head of the AMA's in town today, the Australian Medical Association President Dr Michael Gannon is at the Press Club today for an outline of what the AMA sees as its priorities with the incoming new Turnbull Government. Of course, the Parliament sits at the end of this month. He joins me in the studio this morning. Dr Gannon, good morning.

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Good morning.

PHILIP CLARK: What do you think about school milk? Were you forced to drink it?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Look, I'm not the right age.

PHILIP CLARK: You're probably- you're too young for all this aren't you?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: No that was phased out before I got there, but my wife who grew up in Britain talks with some lament about the horror of school milk.

PHILIP CLARK: Yeah. Do you think there's any nutritional basis for re-introducing a scheme like that?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well there's no question that milk is a super food, and we worry about the calcium intake of a lot of people.

PHILIP CLARK: [Interrupts] Young women especially.

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Especially young women, exactly. And you know, healthy bones make for a healthy life. So, one source or another of dietary calcium is extremely important. Dairy is the best source of calcium.

PHILIP CLARK: Mm. It's an interesting point. There was a time - I mean, some might see it a nanny state or whatever - there was a time, though, when we got into these sort of schemes, didn't we? We, you know, put fluoride in the water and we gave out free school milk, and so on and so forth. We seem to have moved away from that. Have we lost something in the process?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well I'm glad you've mentioned fluoride in National Science Week. I think we should reflect on the benefits that science has brought to all our lives. There is fluoride in the water in the vast majority of places in Australia. A visit to my dentist last week again confirmed how fortunate those of us who grew up in Australia and drink tap water, how good it is for our teeth.

PHILIP CLARK: Yeah, no doubt about that. Alright. You're outlining priorities today. How-look, there's a couple of issues. One is the suggestion that the Federal Department of Health might stop approving the influx of foreign doctors into Australia. In regional Australia- basically if you want to see a doctor in regional Australia you're most likely to see a doctor trained overseas, because that's just the way it is, because doctors who graduate from universities here don't want to go and work in the bush. But there are more doctors coming on

stream as more places are being made available. Do you think there's a case for saying, let's turn off the tap on incoming doctors?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well there's no question that as a nation we under-invested in medical education over years, and what we've seen in the last decade is that we may have even over-corrected. We're really concerned about the number of training positions for triple the number of medical students. That's what coming out now, three times the number that were coming out a decade ago. This country for a long time has been reliant on doctors trained overseas to fill those gaps, and you're exactly right, if you look at rural and regional areas they've relied on these doctors to a huge extent. Look, I would never want to think that we don't- that we got the impression that we don't value the contribution...

PHILIP CLARK: [Interrupts] No, no, no. But to chase though, I mean, do we need to turn off the tap?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well I think it's time to have a look at it, I think that we certainly need to have some robust medical workforce bodies. One of the bureaucracies shut down by the Abbott Government was Health Workforce Australia, and that was doing some good work. We are moving closer and closer towards self-sufficiency in many areas. You raise another important point, how do we get more doctors to regional areas? One of the things we need to do is to give medical students really positive experiences when they go to the bush as part of their training. We need to give junior doctors really positive experiences during their training programs.

PHILIP CLARK: Maybe you should be preferencing people in medical schools who come from regional areas, they've said that.

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well we already...

PHILIP CLARK: [Interrupts] Half the problem is that people grow up in cities and they want to stay there.

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well we already do that, certainly in some States. There's a loading given to people from regional areas, and that's proven to be helpful. So there are- these are all a number of measures that increase the likelihood that someone, when they finish their specialist training, when they finish their GP training, is likely to go and work in a rural or regional area.

PHILIP CLARK: Are you going to be telling the Federal Government today they should be doing something about the Medicare rebate freeze? And they should also be doing something about the big cuts for public hospitals in the States?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: There's no question that right at the front of our agenda, prior to the election, during the election campaign and still now, is to unravel the Medicare freeze. It's so important, it sits there in many ways as a barrier to trust in engaging GPs with important reforms in other areas. Bearing in mind it is a freeze on the rebates patients get when they see doctors, not just GPs, but other specialists. We would like to- that would be a sign of good faith for a government that has indicated a willingness to work constructively with the AMA and the medical profession.

PHILIP CLARK: Hmm. You're likely to get any joy, you think?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Well, just opening up today's newspapers, you know, we realise the budgetary situation that the Government's in. We need to be responsible in calling for

additional, but we don't think that health is the problem in the Australian budget. If you look at...

PHILIP CLARK: There are many lies told about it, aren't there? I mean, this idea that it's all out of control and that we can't afford it, it's just a lie.

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah.

PHILIP CLARK: We can afford it.

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, look, it's not out of control...

PHILIP CLARK: [Interrupts] Point one, it's not out of control and two, we can afford it, can't we?

DR MICHAEL GANNON: Look, we can afford it. Equally, it's time to start making the structural changes so that we can deal with the inevitable increases in health spending that will come with ageing in the population. We intend to work constructively with the Government to help make those changes.

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