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Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Tony Bartone, *RN Breakfast*, 18 January 2017

Subjects: Medicare freeze, New Health Minister

HAMISH MACDONALD: Well, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, we are told, will today appoint Greg Hunt as Health Minister. He'll replace Sussan Ley, who's resigned following questions over her travel expenses. As last year's election clearly showed, yet again, health is a hot button issue for most voters. It makes the portfolio one of the Government's most politically sensitive. The Australian Medical Association is using the new appointment to once again call for an end to the controversial freeze on the Medicare rebate, which it says has pushed up the cost of GP consultations.

Tony Bartone is AMA Vice President. Good morning, welcome to *Breakfast*.

TONY BARTONE: Good morning, Hamish.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Greg Hunt, as Health Minister, given his track record in other portfolios, is it your view that he's the right person for the job?

TONY BARTONE: Look, we'll all wait to hear confirmation of whoever that person is appointed to the ministry. It's rumoured to be Greg Hunt. He obviously has a very good career already in Parliament and has done exceedingly well in his previous portfolios. But we'll await that confirmation from the Prime Minister.

But as soon as that confirmation is confirmed, then we really need to get down, and the new Minister will need to get right down to business, because it's a very important time, a very busy time in health, in taking up that new Ministry.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Would you be optimistic though about working with Greg Hunt, if indeed it is him?

TONY BARTONE: What we really need in terms of an incoming new Health Minister, is a person with vision, a person who understands the concept of the investment and the return on investment that health expenditure is. It's not just a sunk cost. It does invest in the social capital and the economic capital of the community. It does have a return on investment and we need a forward-thinking, person with a plan, and able to communicate that plan back into Cabinet. Able to communicate and speak with all the various stakeholders and able to meet regularly with the people that are the frontline of delivering that care to the community.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Is that a complaint about the previous Minister?

TONY BARTONE: No, no. The previous Minister was very diligent in meeting with all the various stakeholders, including ourselves. She did try to put through some wide-ranging new plans or new policies: the Health Care Home being one of the signature policies that is in the process of being implemented at the moment.

But we really need the understanding that health expenditure is not just an expenditure, it is an investment in our future and it will return in spades, by prevention, by reducing the burden of

disease in the future, and reducing the burden on public hospital expenditure and unnecessary outcomes that relate to that.

HAMISH MACDONALD: The Government has been at loggerheads with doctors over the Medicare rebate freeze, which the Coalition has extended until 2020. Does the change in Minister give you any optimism that that freeze will be lifted?

TONY BARTONE: We've been very persistent and very consistent in our approach to the Government on this matter. The freeze is putting pressure on access to care, especially for our most vulnerable. And it's not just general practice consults, it's all medical practices that are under pressure here. All medical services are under pressure. It's putting pressure even on public hospitals, it's putting pressure on private health expenditure as well. We need to be clear that this is the number one thing that the Government still needs to look at [indistinct] coming in.

HAMISH MACDONALD: [Talks over] Sure, that hasn't answered my question. Does the change in Minister give you any optimism that it will change?

TONY BARTONE: A Minister is always an opportunity to sweep the slate clean and start again. To refocus and to re-energise and to re-attach ourselves to the actual primacy of removing that freeze.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Lifting the freeze would cost, we're told, about \$150 million a year. That money will have to be offset somewhere else in the Health budget. Is there room, in your view, to find those savings elsewhere?

TONY BARTONE: We've always been consistent in saying that our position is not to find those – sorry, let me say this: there are areas where there are duplications of cost. There are areas of wastage and, in unison, we can work together with the Government in ensuring that we can find savings in the Budget. But it's also up to the Government, to the Minister, to find those areas in terms of efficiencies, and also in terms of other areas which can be cut. It's a conversation, it's an understanding that we will work together in unison with the Minister to identify how we can progress that.

HAMISH MACDONALD: So what is your position? That it can be found from the Health budget, or not? Because you started then to say one thing, and then you said another.

TONY BARTONE: What I was trying to say is that, in terms of the broader Health budget, in terms of its position in the wider budget of the Government, that's up to the Government to ensure that the savings in other parts are found to ensure that the Health budget remains intact. Within the Health budget, we can work with the Minister to identify savings in terms of duplication, in terms of wastage, in terms of good cost savings, in terms of better implementation and ...

HAMISH MACDONALD: [Interrupts] Up to the value of \$150 million in order to enable the unfreezing of this?

TONY BARTONE: There's been a number of various estimates put on various programs that could be identified in terms of duplication, which are far in excess of that. And it requires just a Minister to sit down, be very, very diligent, and very, very understanding about what is required. And as I say, get right up to rolling up those sleeves and getting down to work to ensure that we get those health outcomes, and that success that we've come to expect from our health system is not put at risk.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Tony Bartone, thank you very much for your time this morning.

TONY BARTONE: Thank you.

HAMISH MACDONALD: Tony Bartone is Vice President of the Australian Medical Association. Sussan Ley's replacement as Health Minister will be announced by the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, we're being told possibly today.

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