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**Transcript:** AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, ABC Radio Melbourne, *with Jon Faine*, Monday 20 August 2018

**Subject:** Asylum seeker health

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**JON FAINE:** But the AMA are picking up on the issue that was much debated last week about a 12-year-old child on a hunger strike, a 12-year-old on a hunger strike in Nauru. The conditions under which people seeking asylum in Australia are being detained have been debated ad nauseam, but now it takes on a completely different complexion. Tony Bartone is President of the AMA.

Tony, good morning to you.

**TONY BARTONE:** Good morning, Jon.

**JON FAINE:** What else should be done? There is health care on Nauru and on Manus Island. What more should be done?

**TONY BARTONE:** And that's absolutely correct. You make the point, there is really good Australian health professionals working diligently on the island under very trying conditions, very difficult conditions to try and provide the best care that they can. But obviously it's really hard to retrofit an entire medical system into an island in this kind of situation and there are circumstances where things will get out of hand. Then if you overlay that with the reports that we're hearing of hunger strikes and not drinking water, it doesn't take long before medical emergencies do occur on the island. And what we're really saying is we need to have transparency around what is actually happening on the island.

We want to have the ability to have some independent clinical experts go in there and assess the conditions, assess what's going on. But also, I think the Australian public want to know that people that are in the care of the Australian Government have got the access to the timely health care when they need it and especially in the circumstances where it has become really long in the tooth, where children are being detained. Even if we want to get cute about the language, even if it's not their detainment on the island, they're certainly there with absolutely significant issues around their mental health and wellbeing, notwithstanding the other reports that we're hearing at this time.

**JON FAINE:** I'll try and channel my inner Peter Dutton, which I might just point out for the record is not an easy thing for me to do, but Dr Bartone, I suspect the response officially from the Minister in charge of Home Security, as it's now called, may well be that we don't want to do anything that assists the people smuggler model and providing a first world health care system in a third world environment would be sending the wrong message.

**TONY BARTONE:** And my response to the Minister in this situation would be as simple as this: these people are in our care. They are owed a certain level of care by International Convention, and any person in the care of the Australian Government needs to be treated with that same access to the appropriate health care. Yes, we're not saying that you need to have every possible service on the island, but if it does get to a situation where they need to be- have that access, that ability to be transferred off the island; it's done expeditiously ahead of time, ahead of the critical nature. The reports that we saw last week was a case where things were

going too far too long and there is- there are workarounds, there are options to take our people off the island when and so needed because of health care.

**JON FAINE:** You passed a motion at your Federal Council meeting on the weekend in Canberra, but has anyone specifically spoken to either the Health Minister or the Home Affairs Minister about that particular intent? Have you had a chance to directly put it to either of them?

**TONY BARTONE:** So directly at this stage obviously not. It was only just on the weekend. It was our council of our doctors from around the country gathering in one spot. We have had a previous similar motion regarding the opportunity for a team of expert clinical professionals to go onto the island. But now- we've reaffirmed that and highlighted especially in light of the children that we've been talking about. We've sent our media release to the department. They're certainly aware of our intention and we look forward to having continued discussions through the appropriate channels in the days to come.

**JON FAINE:** I'm not quite sure that that is going to result in any change in policy though. I suspect that the competing interests between the humanitarian approach that the doctors are suggesting and the government's overwhelming and overriding concerns about keeping their commitment that people seeking asylum in Australia will never settle or be brought to Australia. I can't see them wavering from that, particularly in the current volatile leadership climate.

**TONY BARTONE:** And you make two very good points there. Yes, there are competing interests here, but first of all we need to remember there is the humanitarian, there is the access to care, the access to medical [indistinct]. That's an unwavering- an absolute necessity in this regard. But there are other options rather than relocation to Australia that can be followed, especially where medical care so dictates that they need to be taken off the island. They're available. It's just the processes and the timing and the recognition of that takes so much unintended time that it leads to further consequences and further negative outcomes, and that's the conditions that I was referring to in terms of the health professionals that are currently there, trying to do the best they can, working sometimes to be on the limits of what they can provide.

**JON FAINE:** Well, in the current climate, let's hope that issues as important as this don't get lost because of all the leadership speculation. Thank you. Dr Tony Bartone, President of the AMA, the doctors' association.

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