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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, ABC TV, *News Breakfast with Michael Rowland and Virginia Trioli*, Tuesday, 23 October 2018

Subject: Transfer of 11 asylum seeker children from Nauru

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: We'll return now to our top story, the evacuation of 11 children from Nauru. Border Force's Surgeon General revealed overnight the health of asylum seekers on the island has recently deteriorated. Here is the Australian Border Force Surgeon General, Parbodh Gogna, speaking to a Senate committee overnight.

[Excerpt]

PARBODH GOGNA: They'd seen an unprecedented jump in the number of people presenting to the facilities in the last couple of months, so a significant ramp-up at that point. Everything from mental health, and obviously there was physical illness as well. You would hear anecdotal discussions in the mess such as “five years”, or “prolonged periods”, or whether resilience had broken down, or whether it was functions regarding the parents unable to cope, and whether there was a level of unwellness in the parents that would transfer in the ability of the coping of children.

[End of excerpt]

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Border Force Doctor Gogna there. Now we spoke to the President of the AMA, Tony Bartone, last week after a senior Australian doctor was deported from the island. He re-joins us again now. Tony Bartone, good to have your company again.

TONY BARTONE: Good morning, Virginia.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Tell us what you know about the deported or the transferred 11 children?

TONY BARTONE: The news overnight that was presented in the Senate Estimates is clearly a development that we obviously welcome and acknowledge, but it really goes to the heart of the problem. We've been calling for a long period of time for the removal of these children to the Australian mainland or to other appropriate health facilities to ensure their adequate wellbeing. We've heard the stories. We're aware of the enormous mental health issues, the stress, the vulnerability behind that. Other urgent physical medical conditions which require the treatment, obviously [indistinct] too long and this is now obviously making an enormous impact on their health and wellbeing.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Is it your understanding there's 11 kids here in Australia?

TONY BARTONE: I believe so.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Okay, and you'd like all the other kids on Nauru brought here too?

TONY BARTONE: We've been vocal for a long period of time calling for all the children and their families off the island.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Do you know if these children are accompanied or unaccompanied?

TONY BARTONE: I believe they will be accompanied. It's been our position. It's been also the understood position by the authorities. Dr Gogna, who gave evidence last night, would have been clear also in that undertaking in ensuring that they would be not unaccompanied.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: When we talk about serious health issues, based on what the doctors who've been dealing with the situation have told you and the AMA, what is the worst case they are looking at in terms of these often very young kids, in terms of what they're going through?

TONY BARTONE: Everything from attempts at their own life, significant fluid and food refusal for long periods of time, with electrolyte disturbances, which obviously can impact on heart rhythm, complete withdrawal, lack of communication.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: This is called Withdrawal Syndrome. It's a very rare syndrome and many Australians might not know what that is. What is it? Is it just giving up on life?

TONY BARTONE: As the name suggests, basically completely withdrawing from their immediate environment, from their emotional environment. Lack of communication, lack of engagement, lack of actually responding. It is actually quite uncommon in this part of the world. There have been reports in other parts of the world, in the Northern Hemisphere. But clearly, regardless of the specifics of it, it is unacceptable, and it's putting them at risk.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: A deal could be in the offering here. Finally some form of political compromise may be about to erupt in Canberra involving these kids and their families being resettled in New Zealand, but the back door to Australia being closed to them forever. Where do you and where does the AMA stand on that?

TONY BARTONE: We're clear on our position. We want the children and their families off the island with appropriate medical attention, as long as the medical facilities are of the grade that we expect. We've called for an independent panel to assure in the oversight of both the facilities and the transfer, and as long as all of those needs are met, we're very, very clear in our support for getting those children off the island.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: So it doesn't matter to you whether it's New Zealand or Australia?

TONY BARTONE: I'm sure that in the process, as long as those facilities are agreed and overseen, absolutely.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: And they're pretty good in New Zealand?

TONY BARTONE: Absolutely, and there needs to be some assurance about who is going to pick up the oversight and responsibility on this issue. But clearly, we just need a solution and we need that solution now.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: The Republic of Nauru has been pushing back pretty hard in the last few days against suggestions in the Australian media that they're not doing all that they should,

medically, for their own people but also for those refugees. Have a look at a couple of, also, tweets that were sent out yesterday by the Republic of Nauru, saying it “has one of the leading and most modern hospitals in the Pacific, staffed with practitioners from around the world. Refugees and locals get medical care and attention”. And then another tweet as well about how they've invested heavily in their health care. Is it true, do they have these great hospital facilities, and do the refugees get access to it?

TONY BARTONE: The Australian Government has been very significant in its aid and support of really scaling up those facilities. So the doctors on the island have been doing a sterling job, often volunteers in this space. But obviously, when you have an overlying principle of five years without a prospect of resettlement, with all of the other mental anguish and vulnerability and trauma that goes into an already damaged and traumatically exposed population, you can't expect that the health and wellbeing will be allowed to come to the fore.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Tony Bartone, good to have you on the program today. Thank you.

TONY BARTONE: My pleasure, thank you.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: And we've got confirmation that, yes, those 11 children were transferred to Australia with their family members, as the AMA and others have been calling for. We'll return to establish exactly where they have gone in the next few hours.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Fifty-two children still on Nauru.

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