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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, Sky News Live, *Afternoon Agenda with Kieran Gilbert*, Monday, 27 January 2020

Subject: Coronavirus preparedness

KIERAN GILBERT: Let's take you live now to Melbourne. Dr Tony Bartone joins me, President of the Australian Medical Association.

Dr Bartone, thanks very much for your time. Do you believe that Australia is well positioned to deal with the outbreak of this particular virus in terms of detection and treatment?

TONY BARTONE: Look, it's clear that right from the outset, the Chief Medical Officer and all the other authorities in association and coordination with him have had the appropriate measures in place. Even before this began, WHO had rated Australia's preparedness for a virus epidemic as being equal to all of the other countries or better. So, we're really well positioned, right from the outset. The information was about an evolving threat.

It's important to remember that this time last week, we still didn't even have a case of human-to-human transmission, and also that there was a lag in terms of information coming out, so a lot has happened in just over a week. And now we're really at the stage where we're really very well prepared in terms of the messaging and the coordination of the authorities, in terms of dealing with any contacts, and the contact tracing that goes from those isolated cases, which are then put into isolation.

KIERAN GILBERT: So, should we be reassured by the fact that the handful of cases that have been detected in Australia, that those individuals are all stable right now?

TONY BARTONE: That's exactly correct. They are all stable, we know that this is a - when you look at the propensity of the virus so far - and we are learning more and more every day about this, and we're still gathering information - but it seems that the propensity to cause serious illness is not as much as potentially could have been. But these people have been identified, they're in hospital, they're in isolation, and they are recovering.

The other thing I'd like to make a mention of is that all these cases have originated from exposure in the affected province. That is, there's been no cases of human-to-human transmission yet identified here in Australia, and that is a reason why the Australian public should really be reassured that at this stage there is no need for particular alarm. Vigilance is required, absolutely, and the messaging does need to be observed.

KIERAN GILBERT: The National Health Commission in China indicated that this virus is infectious during the incubation period. I think the estimate was one to 14 days of that particular incubation period of the coronavirus. If it's infectious before the symptoms show up, how much of a worry is that?

TONY BARTONE: Well, that would be a novel development. Coronaviruses typically - in previous experience - have not been infectious before the symptoms' onset. So

that infectivity during the incubation period would be a significant development, and we'd have to change the whole approach in terms of contact tracing, and also in terms of our public health messaging.

I understand the Chief Medical Officer is indeed trying to verify the veracity of those reports, and as soon as those reports are confirmed, I'm sure that we'll change - if we need to - any appropriate measures. But for this stage, we're still proceeding as is.

KIERAN GILBERT: When you look at - and I know you've touched on this already - but the lessons that have been learned from previous outbreaks, how does it compare, for example, to something like SARS?

TONY BARTONE: Well, so far it's been relatively mild set of symptoms or conditions resulting from infection from the virus. In fact, part of the problem why the numbers are starting to rise so quickly in recent days in China is that a lot of the earlier cases were, you know, typically so mild they weren't even picked up as cases of this novel coronavirus. And you need to remember also, that this is now flu season in China, so there's a lot of people with flu symptoms in part of the population, so it was missed in the early days.

So that's part of the reason why, at this stage, we're gathering that information. We need to learn a lot more about the virus, but it seems to be relatively milder than other ones, but of course we have to keep the information and watch it carefully. We're not out of the woods yet.

KIERAN GILBERT: And in terms of how the authorities in China, but elsewhere, try and prevent this sort of thing into the future - what's at the core of the problem here? How are these viruses emerging?

TONY BARTONE: Well, if we go back to the first reports, this was a virus which was found only in animals, and it's thought to have originated in the fish markets there, and then we've had these cases of animal-to-human transmission. Now, that's unusual, but it's occurred. But the other two types that you've mentioned is a sign that, you know, in this global environment, in this new global village that we're so connected, we need to be assured that all international citizens are playing their part in terms of guidelines and responsiveness, and that information sharing and coordination that is crucial in terms of identifying, then controlling and monitoring the spread of any outbreaks.

KIERAN GILBERT: And Dr Bartone, finally, in terms of that coordination and the communication that you talk about, how does that unfold? How is that carried out with your members across the nation?

TONY BARTONE: So, the CMO and the incident response team or reporting room are in constant contact with the State and Territory counterparts and chief health officers. And of course, they have put out information. The CMO has written and, well, obviously because of the holiday, a lot of those GPs and emergency physicians will be receiving the notifications in the coming days, but has written as of yesterday to all those doctors. There have been alerts put out by the various State health departments, and clearly all the other channels will be utilised, including our own media channels in terms of ensuring that information is shared both with our

members, other medical practitioners, and of course, more importantly, the community and the general public.

KIERAN GILBERT: AMA President, Dr Tony Bartone, thanks as always for your update on that developing story.

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