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Transcript: AMA President, Dr Michael Gannon, Sky News, 27 March 2017

Subject: Adult Immunisation; Pete Evans

AHRON YOUNG: From Perth, we're joined by the President of the AMA, Dr Michael Gannon. Thank you so much for your time. First, talk to us about the importance of adult immunisation.

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, there's been a lot of focus on the child immunisation program recently, but this important work from the *Medical Journal of Australia* shows how far behind we are with adult vaccination. There's always two elements to any vaccination program. There's the individual benefit, and then there's the benefit to the wider community. And we're just not meeting the mark when it comes to getting those people who should be receiving free vaccination against things like influenza, against things like shingles, and against pneumococcus, one of the main bacterial causes of pneumonia - we're just not getting to the right mark.

AHRON YOUNG: There seems to be so much advice out there. One - well - source of that is Pete Evans, the celebrity chef. I want to get your comments, because a few of your colleagues have been quite strong about what he has said. The clear question is, do you think that we should be getting our advice from celebrity chefs?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, I think that Pete should stick to pearl couscous, and the scientists can stick to pertussis. Some of his comments are so irresponsible. He is an opinion leader, and when it comes to things like the importance of adding fluoride to the water in those parts of Australia where there's not the natural levels of fluoride to protect teeth, when it comes to some of his comments about nutrition and about important dietary sources of calcium, and now he's dipped a toe in the water when it comes to vaccination, he needs to be more responsible.

He's got some fairly flaky ideas. We know some of the people he communicates with, in terms of his so-called sources. I think he should stick to his very obvious talents in the kitchen and leave the science to the scientists.

CAROLINE MARCUS: Dr Gannon, I couldn't have said it better myself, but what Pete Evans said most recently in his comments have been in relation to babies only being fed breast milk. Of course, this is the advice that we often hear, that breast milk is best. Breast is best. But sometimes that isn't an option for mothers. I'd like to get your views on that.

He also made some comments about sunscreen. Having previously said that he doesn't wear it, he now says he only uses non-toxic brands. So could you set the record straight on those two issues?

MICHAEL GANNON: Yeah, breastfeeding's a difficult issue. There's no question that breast milk is the preferred food for all babies for the first five or six months of life. It not only has a delicate balance of calories and nutrients that have evolved over millions of years but, back to the subject of infectious disease, we see passive transfer of antibodies.

So to one extent or another, babies are protected by the transfer of maternal antibodies, and when we have organised vaccination programs against things like whooping cough and influenza, that's how we protect babies in the first few months of life. Now, formula is designed to try and mimic the caloric balance of breast milk. It's actually better when it comes to things like iron and vitamin D, but overall, breast is best.

I'd love to see us stop demonising that minority of women who find it hard to make breast milk. It's a bit like every other element of human physiology. Some women make gallons, some women really struggle, and others can't breastfeed for medical reasons. So let's try and support the women who find it difficult, and let's try and psychologically support those who can't make breast milk.

When it comes to sunscreen, again, sadly, Australia wins the gold medal when it comes to melanoma and non-melanoma skin cancer. It maims, disfigures, and kills more people in Australia than in any other country on the planet. Between 80 and 90 per cent of us have Anglo-Celtic heritage. We've got the worst skin possible for one of the hottest climates in the world. SPF 30 plus, 50 plus sunscreen is sometimes the only protection we've got. I would encourage people to lather it on.

SAMANTHA MAIDEN: Just for people at home, though, that are wondering what vaccinations they should get, I mean, the flu jab isn't compulsory. You hear that you should have whooping cough before you have children, for top-ups and so on. What are the vaccinations people should actually be getting, and how often should they be getting them when they're adults?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think people can be forgiven for the bewildering array of vaccines that are available on the schedule at the moment, but it's your GP's job to be the expert in that, to talk about exactly what you might need. For the vast majority of healthy adult Australians, the only vaccination conversations they might have are when they're preparing to travel overseas, or the annual influenza vaccination.

Now, those employers that offer their staff influenza vaccination are not only being responsible, they're being smart. Influenza infection is a significant cause of absenteeism. Again, there's this tendency to conflate colds with the flu. The cold might make you have a snuffly nose and have a sore throat for a couple of days. Even as a healthy adult, if you catch influenza you'll be in bed for a week. If you've got an underlying health problem, it might put you in hospital. So it's your GP's job.

This is the reason why we would recommend that people do make regular appointments to see their GP. Those health promotion opportunities that come from talking about tobacco, alcohol, sexual health, and to talk about vaccination and exactly which vaccines wane over time. For example, whooping cough, diphtheria, tetanus; adults should be having one of those about every 10 years.

SAMANTHA MAIDEN: Dr Michael Gannon, thank you very much for your time.

MICHAEL GANNON: That's a pleasure.

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