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Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Tony Bartone, ABC Radio Sydney, *Breakfast with Wendy Harmer and Robbie Buck*, Tuesday 27 March 2018

Subject: Flu Vaccinations

WENDY HARMER: Well, what about that flu jab, eh? Yesterday, the Australian Medical Association was urging people to hold off getting it as some pharmacies may be offering it too early. And look, while we're on the topic of pharmacies, we happened upon a message on Facebook yesterday that said that, well, they had their flu shot in a pharmacy, they were then taken upstairs to a room, and the person giving the shot said: look, here's a bottle of bioceuticals, why don't you purchase that in order to maximise the effectiveness of your vaccine? Well, that's very interesting; upselling at the chemist. What's that about?

We thought we'd better investigate more on what people should be doing in these situations, when to take your flu jab and what you need to do. Do you need to have a bit of lie down and a biscuit or whatever?

Dr Tony Bartone is the Vice President of the Australian Medical Association. He joins us on the line this morning, and thank you for my cup of tea, Toni Matthews. Thank you, sweetie. Yes, hello Tony.

TONY BARTONE: Hello there, Wendy. How are you?

WENDY HARMER: I'm good-o, thank you. So, what is the best time to get that flu jab? I mean, it is an interesting one, isn't it, because we've got a very late summer here. I mean, you're not a meteorologist, so how can we tell what's the best time to have our flu jab?

TONY BARTONE: Look, the simple answer is that really any time from about the middle of April onwards is the appropriate time to really start thinking about having that vaccination, so certainly as we approach the end of April, early May, you'd want to have had it done by then.

The reasons for that are quite simple. If we look at the effectiveness of that flu vaccination, we know that at about the three to four-month mark, it starts to wane. What else do we know? We know that the peak of the flu season is around July, August, September. So, if we're going to maximise our protection before that effectiveness starts to wane, we want to match the timing of both the vaccination with the timing of the peak. And for that reason, mid-April onwards is a perfect time to start having your vaccination.

If you have it too early - and especially as we know in the elderly - the flu vaccination effectiveness isn't as good as it might be in younger members of the population. So, we need to ensure that we're really getting the maximum protection at the maximum time.

ROBBIE BUCK: Tony, we saw a lot of this last year, didn't we? We had that hellish flu season, last year, and there were lots of people saying: look, I came down with it even though I'd had the flu shot. I guess in those cases, perhaps they were getting it too early.

TONY BARTONE: Well, that may have been part of it, but what we do know for actual fact, last year was that there was a mutation in the strain of the virus as it's circulating, and also in particular, the vaccines that were around last year weren't particularly effective at stimulating their immune system especially in the elderly, which really was partly responsible for that peak in the elderly suffering the brunt of that flu epidemic last year. In fact, around about- and I know about 30 per cent effectiveness was the mark. And that's why this year, the Government's releasing two new vaccinations; one which is about four times as strong as what we were giving last year, and the other one has a little bit of a turbo-charge in there to make it work a lot more effectively. So, those ones are particularly for the over 65s. They aren't in the

marketplace at the moment. They are part of the Government's National Immunisation Program, i.e., they're going to be delivered free for use for the patients over 65 and they can get that down at their local doctor's surgery in the process.

WENDY HARMER: Tony, are you saying that, though, for the rest of us, we're going to be left with this less efficacious vaccine, and one that doesn't last very long anyway, and one that can be beaten by a mutation? I mean, what is the point of getting it?

TONY BARTONE: Sorry if I've left you with that impression, I'm sorry for that. What we know is that in the population under 65, they will react much more effectively to the most current, what we call quadrivalent strain of the influenza vaccine, but it's still the same principle.

We know that vaccination effectiveness does wane about 8 per cent or so a month after three to four months. So, we want to really match our protection with the peak of the season, and that's really why we're saying- we're not saying don't have it, we're just saying don't go rushing in in early March or middle of March to have it, let's get it done closer to the mid-April, late April period, and maximise your effectiveness into the peak of the season.

ROBBIE BUCK: Tony, you mentioned that these new vaccines have been turbo-charged, they're more effective. Does it mean that they're more likely to have side effects?

TONY BARTONE: Look, there might be the incident of, you know- the studies have shown that there might be some- a little bit of an increased incidence of local side effects, but nothing in terms of anything that should interfere with you getting it around. So, you might get a little bit of an extra bit of redness or a bit of slowing or pain at the side of the injection, but they're [indistinct] and usually they disappear within a day or two.

WENDY HARMER: Alright. We're talking about the over 65s, and we've talked about adults, but what about kids? What's the recommendation there, Tony?

TONY BARTONE: So basically, it's quite simple. Anyone over the age of six months can avail themselves of a flu vaccination and really when it comes to preventing the flu, the only thing that's absolutely been shown to be effective in that space is flu vaccination. So, any child over the age of six months. Now, depending on the age, there are different vaccines for different age groups, and that's a conversation you need to have obviously with the doctor or your practice nurse at the time of vaccination. But you know, there are- anyone over six months can have that, and actually the children's hospitals will probably have told you last year that it was young children who weren't vaccinated, which were also being admitted with complications of influenza.

WENDY HARMER: Alright. Let's go to this little message on Facebook that I mentioned earlier. A patient there who said that they went into a pharmacy and they were- it was recommended that they buy bioceuticals to make the vaccine more effective. What do you have to say about that?

TONY BARTONE: Look, what- I'll leave that case alone, but in general when you go to have your vaccination, you're going to have a medical intervention to increase your immune system, to protect from getting influenza. Now, you want that advice and you want that treatment in an independent environment, and that's why when we say the best place for your flu vaccination is at your local doctor's surgery. You don't need to be exposed to messages which conflict, which have dubious levels of evidence supporting the claim, and furthermore, you know, in a time of vulnerability have messages which you weren't ready or weren't prepared for or don't have the ability to maybe even say no to. So...

WENDY HARMER: [Interrupts] There is a bit of a turf war here, isn't there, though, between the GPs and pharmacists about where to get your flu shot, to be fair?

TONY BARTONE: Look, and it's not a question of turf war. It's where- we would say that it's about where would you be best placed or best suited to have that medical intervention? And really, in the environment, if you look at what is a very simple procedure but which really has a bit of complexity behind the provision, making sure that you're not allergic to the vaccine, making sure that you're being observed afterwards and have that- and if anything was to happen, you're in the best place for it to be managed immediately by someone with the appropriate experience. And that's really what it comes down to.

WENDY HARMER: Just a note here from one of our listeners, Tony, who said: can you clarify when will that stronger flu shot - both of them - be available for the over 65s?

TONY BARTONE: Okay. So, that's available through the National Immunisation Program, will be delivered to all the medical practices around the country around about mid-April as part of the Government's National Immunisation Program. It's about 4.5 million doses of the vaccine, which need to be distributed roughly at all the right times for all the various points of contact.

WENDY HARMER: Good on you, Tony. Thanks for joining us today.

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