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Transcript: AMA Vice President, Dr Tony Bartone, Sky News, 30 October 2016

Subjects: AMA Safe Hours Audit, and Asylum Seekers

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Well, too many Australian doctors are working unsafe hours in public hospitals, with reports of some medical professionals working continuous unbroken shifts of up to 43 hours. The AMA Vice-President Dr Tony Bartone is today launching the 2016 Safe Hours Audit. He joins us now live from Canberra. Dr Bartone, thank you for your time, we do appreciate it. I feel like most of the doctors I know who are in the public hospital system always seem to be doing huge hours, they're constantly seeming to be exhausted. Just how widespread is the problem?

TONY BARTONE: Good afternoon, Ashleigh. Look, this is a significant problem, and it is widespread. We know from our last audit five years ago that 53 per cent of respondents said that they were working rosters which were consistent with unsafe hours or over-long hours and, so, this is an opportunity to see and reflect whether there's been an improvement. To see if the increasing number of medical students coming through and doctors into the system, if there has been an opportunity to better improve rostering practices in line with our national code, and ensure that the quality healthcare system that we pride ourselves on in Australia continues to be world-class and world foremost.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Well, I know that if I was a patient in a public hospital, I certainly wouldn't want to have a doctor working on me if they'd been on shift for 43 hours or so. It could be pretty dangerous, couldn't it?

TONY BARTONE: Well, look, that example of 43 hours was in one of the reports in the last audit and we need to ensure that that becomes absolutely a thing of the past. We need to ensure that better rostering practices are in place, ensuring that there's adequate opportunity to sleep between shifts, that there's appropriate time to refresh and to, basically, as our doctors inform us and tell us, they feel that their fatigue does potentially impact on their ability to concentrate and their work performance. Of course, the obvious implication is that there may and can be a potential quality of care issue, which they feel as foremost.

But let's not forget, also, the impact that it puts on the wellbeing of our doctors, this really rich and important resource in our community that we spend so much time developing and upskilling. We need to ensure their health and wellbeing and that a safe workplace is provided to ensure that things like motorcar accidents that happen at the end of long and unsafe shifts, the increased risks of heart disease and mental health issues and depression and numerous other conditions don't become as frequent as they have been in the past.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: So, what is the AMA going to do with the results of this audit that you're launching today? What are you actually lobbying for here? Is it stronger workplace laws in this space or is it simply coming down to more funding and, in particular, more funding for more doctors doing the work?

TONY BARTONE: Well, it's all of that and more. So, basically, the results will be collated and it will be launched early next year once all the data is collected. And we'll compare and see the results, and it needs to be an improvement from past episodes and past results. But obviously it's about ensuring that, as I said, we do have a national code of practice, a guide into

rostering and shift work practices and rostering in hospitals, and it's a call to both the authorities, the Government, and all the other people who have a role to play in this space to ensure that we have conditions which not only deliver the best possible care for our patients but also look after the long-term wellbeing of our most important resource, our doctors.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Dr Bartone, I'm also keen for your view on the news of the day today that the Government's going to be introducing legislation essentially banning for life anyone who tries to come to Australia by boat seeking asylum. In the past, of course, your organisation, the AMA, has been particularly outspoken on the way our Government is treating asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island. I'm keen for your reaction to this move today. Are you worried that it could have negative impacts on the mental health of those people who are on Nauru and Manus?

TONY BARTONE: Look, we've been quite, as you say, quite outspoken in the past, and we feel it's our obligation and our duty to call out instances of where the care and the wellbeing of asylum seekers in the care of our Government have not been up to scratch, have not been consistent with what we expect as Australia, in terms of access to care to any of our citizens, and that's what we're really on about here.

Now, the announcement today, it's not for us to comment on the immigration policy, but of course if it does feed through and potentially can create further, instances or opportunities for mental health and other related issues in those detention centres – of course it's a concern. And we basically want to be very clear. We have a duty of care to speak out about conditions, and in line with our recent submission that we've launched with the Senate Inquiry, we need to ensure that there is an independent transparent statutory body of appropriate clinicians that can oversee and ensure that the same access to care is available to those asylum seekers in our detention centres there, and that's got to be number one, two, and three.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: The Reverend Tim Costello has described what's going on in Nauru and Manus as psychological torture of asylum seekers. Would the AMA agree with that assessment?

TONY BARTONE: Look, we're aware both anecdotally and in reports that, of course, there are significant mental health and wellbeing issues in terms of the people, the detainees, in these detention centres. And, of course, that's a concern and we've been very, very clear that there needs to be conditions which do not increase or put at risk the opportunity for further exacerbation, and not the opportunity to have the access to care that anyone might need in those situations.

But, more importantly, it's about ensuring that the most vulnerable are dealt with, and ensure that they are not subject to further instances where mental health and wellbeing is put further at risk.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Dr Bartone, the Vice-President of the Australian Medical Association. We appreciate you joining us on *Weekend Live* this afternoon. Thank you.

TONY BARTONE: Thank you

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