

# TRANSCRIPT

**Tuesday, 2 April 2024**

**Transcript: AMA President, Professor Stephen Robson, Outlet: ABC Melbourne Radio, Tuesday, 2 April 2024**

**Subject: AMA urges take up of 'safe' influenza vaccination as season begins**

HOST: Richard Willingham

RICHARD WILLINGHAM: Is the flu season upon us earlier?

STEVE ROBSON: Flu season is generally over the Australian winter, but we've noted recently over the last few years it's beginning a little bit earlier each year. So I think it makes perfect sense that everybody starts to attune to that really now and start to prep for the flu season.

RICHARD WILLINGHAM: And does that mean people should be getting their flu shot earlier, or just making sure it's booked in when they regularly do it?

STEVE ROBSON: Yeah. So the influenza vaccine will become available sometime this month. And of course it is developed looking at the types of influenza virus that affected the northern hemisphere. So this year's concoction of vaccine will become available soon. And it's really important that Australians make sure they're ready, if they can get appointments to have vaccinations and things, because pre-pandemic there was a trend to reduced rates of influenza vaccination in Australia. And particularly in vulnerable groups - a great example being women who are pregnant. So there's been some moves to try and just make sure it's back on everybody's radar. And I think the earlier that you try and get it on everybody's radar, the better it is, Richard.

RICHARD WILLINGHAM: You've spoken, I think, about vaccination fatigue. What does that mean?

STEVE ROBSON:.. And we know that across the course of the pandemic, Australians have been asked to consider having lots of vaccinations for COVID, and there's often been some at times difficult to decipher advice about when and whom is eligible for those vaccinations. So people have got a sense there's vaccination going on, and it's also seen a real swing toward mis and disinformation about vaccination. So there's a sense that Australians are sort of taking a deep breath, yet another vaccination. But it's really important to understand that influenza vaccination is simple. It is safe, it's very effective, and it's something that can protect the whole community at a time of great threat and great risk to a lot of vulnerable Australians.

RICHARD WILLINGHAM: Does the prevalence of COVID in the community make people who get COVID- not COVID, sorry, flu, you're looking at some risks of a double whammy?

STEVE ROBSON: Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. Because the same environmental conditions, where people are huddled together, cooler weather, et cetera, people tend not to be outside as much, are those that are very favourable to the spread of all sorts of respiratory viruses. We're seeing RSV, respiratory syncytial virus. All- I think Australians will- your listeners will recognise just how many of these viral respiratory things have been around in the community recently. So winter will be a time of especial vulnerability for a lot of

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Australians. And making sure that you're prepped and ready for something that you really can protect against, like influenza, is really important.

RICHARD WILLINGHAM: How frustrated do you get as a medical professional that you have to keep constantly having these fights - not fights, but raising the flag about people needing to get vaccinated in the sort of post-COVID- well, not-post COVID, we've still got COVID, but in the sort of post pandemic phase? How much has it changed the work that you have to do in the places like the AMA or just for doctors and chemists in general?

STEVE ROBSON I don't think we get frustrated or angry or anything like that. I think the thing is that we need to say: well, look, let's focus on some things that really bring high value to the health of the community. And there are millions of Australians who are immune suppressed, have other medical conditions, who we know if they get an infection like influenza, it can make them very ill, it can take their life. And of course, we already have enough strains on the health system at the moment that anything we can do to take pressure off the health system and to protect Australians who are medically very vulnerable makes great sense. So I think it's more how can we get that message out? How can we reassure Australians that vaccination is safe and effective, and really say: look, it is worth the effort of going in and getting a vaccination. And we know that it takes time and it takes effort to do those things, but we need to make sure that we remind people, actually, it's a simple thing that really is worth it.

RICHARD WILLINGHAM: And it's probably a little bit out of your wheelhouse, but you're definitely an interested party. How do you- is there a message to social media giants about disinformation and misinformation around vaccinations?

STEVE ROBSON: I think we're seeing around the world a large amount of mis and disinformation about vaccination. It had always been around, but I think during the pandemic it has absolutely reached a crescendo. I've personally been attacked. I ended up in police protection at one stage after threats from anti-vax activists. So in any way saying that this is a situation you can just write off is really not true. So we have an obligation, I think, across the community as health professionals, to just remind people that, in fact, the overwhelming body of evidence says that vaccination is one of the most effective and also cost effective things that the community can do to protect themselves and in particular, protect really vulnerable Australians, often those who are not visible to the broader community.

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