



**A Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of
the 33rd Congress of the Scandinavian Society of
Anaesthesiology and Intensive Care, SSAI
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Delivered via video recording.

Ladies and gentlemen

It is a profound pleasure to welcome you all to Iceland, to this splendid new concert and conference hall where the artist Ólafur Elíasson has created a glass masterpiece which not only embraces the entire building but also continually calls the ocean and the mountains into play, conducts the ever-changing light into a symphony of colours.

In other countries the following question is sometimes posed: What was Iceland's response to the financial crisis? Here, you can witness one of the answers. Although some had their doubts, it was decided to finish this large work of art and put a concert hall inside it in order to host conferences on important issues; thus enriching our souls with music and culture, dialogues on science and social reforms, inviting people from all over the world to explore in this visionary setting avenues to a better world, healthier life, more harmonious communities.

Iceland is, like the other Nordic countries, in many ways illustrative of a national dedication to a comprehensive healthcare for all, that through the institutional framework we call society we should be responsible for one another. But Iceland also signifies that even the smallest of nations can contribute to the advancement of science, help to cure challenging diseases, test new methods, map out roads to recovery.

In many ways our country has served as a laboratory where the interplay of variables can be easily observed, where individuals are so strongly linked to the community that most of us see it as our moral duty to participate in programmes or projects aimed at furthering the success of medical and behavioural science.

We can draw on significant historical examples of how, through public debate and democratic dialogue, sustained information campaigns, the active involvement of the population and strong cooperation between health specialists and community leaders, a dramatic transformation was brought about in social policies and public attitudes; how this paved the way for real changes that substantially improved our public health.

We can cite lessons from the campaign against tuberculosis in the 1930s to the 1950s, the campaign against cardiovascular diseases which started in the 1960s and has lasted to the present day, similarly the campaign against alcoholism from the 1980s and in recent decades the nationwide monitoring aimed at reducing the threat of breast cancer as well as examples from campaigns with respect to many other diseases. In each and every case the linking of public involvement to the best available expert medical knowledge was the key to success.

In the Nordic countries, serving the health of others has always been seen as a noble profession; our societies have felt that they were responsible for the care and treatment given to those in need. The nature of our health service has created a strong culture of trust which enables doctors and scientists to engage freely in different types of research, and combine it with access to universities and research institutes in other countries for further results.

The goodwill shown by the Icelandic people towards the medical profession has been extraordinary and consequently we have been very open and willing to participate in many different medical research projects, provide private information and samples that in many other countries would have led to complicated privacy laws or extensive formal contracts.

We have also been able to combine good medical training in our own country with access to universities, medical research institutes and hospitals in other countries for further and more specialised education and to engage in multiple international research programs, to be at one and the same time strongly Icelandic and truly international in our approach.

Your congress is an important venue for the continuation of this cooperation, a gathering which reminds us both of the successes which

have been achieved and the challenges that lie ahead; some larger than mankind has ever encountered.

The people of Iceland do not need to go to international conferences to discover that climate change is indeed happening and at an accelerated rate, causing extreme weather patterns and destruction on all continents, bringing severe threats to coastal cities and regions where more than half of mankind already lives.

Iceland has the largest glaciers in Europe and for more than half a century our scientists have studied them extensively. We know that they are fast retreating, that the Arctic sea ice is getting thinner, that the Greenland ice sheet is giving away, melting little by little into the ocean, creating potentially harmful sea level rises all over the world.

Climate change will transform the pattern of various diseases, bring frequent crises to intensive care units, hospitals and other health institutions, place the medical profession at the forefront of this new global threat.

I hope that your dialogue and cooperation can help to further the involvement of health experts and professionals in the necessary global debate on what is now at stake. We need your experience, learning and guidance and with that wish I welcome you all and hope that your conference will be a great success.