



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the 16th Congress of the
European Sleep Research Society
Reykjavík
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Ladies and Gentlemen

May I begin by welcoming you all to Iceland and express how honoured we are that this distinguished congress of the European Sleep Research Society has decided to assemble in our capital.

It can also be said that it is a daring enterprise to bring so many outstanding experts on sleep to Iceland in the beginning of June when the night almost disappears into an eternal day and the nation hardly sleeps at all. Many have wondered how we manage to survive throughout these bright June nights and the secret might now be discovered by subjecting the most distinguished scientists in the field to this practical experience. Some people, however, might note that it is rather odd to gather for extensive discussions on sleep at a place and at a time when the prevailing tradition is not to sleep at all. The point has also been made that in order to achieve a scientific balance in this experiment the Congress of the European Sleep Research Society must be called back to Iceland during the month of December when the order of the darkest days is not to wake up.

The forces of nature in the North have made Iceland and our neighbouring regions a constantly changing theatre of light and colours where the slowly approaching darkness and the gradually emerging day bring out a playful symphony of colours. Iceland is geologically speaking the youngest country on earth and every day here we can witness the ongoing process of creation.

In the opening of the Old Testament we are told how the Almighty created the Earth in six days and, because the work was then finished, decided to rest. The only problem with this description is that it is not entirely accurate because when it came to the creation of Iceland the

Almighty became so fascinated by the possibilities that creation has continued in our country until this very day: With new volcanoes and large lava fields, with new islands and geysers, with earthquakes and the ever-growing split between the American and the European continents as they move from each other by an inch every year along the rift which goes straight through Iceland from southwest to northeast.

It is indeed a humbling experience to grow up in such a country because we are every day reminded of forces stronger than ourselves, stronger than the combined strength of the scientific and technological advances of man, reminded that we are not the masters of the universe and we should humbly and gratefully guard the heritage we have been given.

We hope that our friends and visitors from far away places will share in this experience during their stay in our country and also take some time to observe the society we have developed.

There are many lessons which can be learned from the way this small nation grew throughout the twentieth century from being one of the poorest in Europe into being now among the most affluent countries in the world, how a society of farmers and fishermen became so technologically advanced that Iceland is now a primary example of a highly developed information society with top world scores in mobile phone penetration, Internet usage and personal computer ownership.

A fundamental strand in this modernisation process has been the development of our healthcare system, the wide network of medical services available to all and the operation of high-tech modern hospitals. Iceland has become the home of extensive scientific and medical research dedicated to finding cures and treatment for many of the most difficult diseases of our times. The genetic research companies which have been created in recent years have become well known but there are many other examples that can be given of how we have tried to play an important part in scientific progress. The Icelandic Cancer Society has for decades provided the framework for many important research projects, research laboratories contributed to the understanding of retroviruses such as HIV, and Flaga has been a pioneer in the field of sleep research.

It is worth reflecting on how such a small nation has been able to become a significant partner in scientific progress within the highly advanced fields of medical and health research. There are of course many explanations but I want to emphasize three in particular.

Firstly, the Icelandic public health care system has been based on the principle of equal treatment for all and open access for everybody

wherever they live in the country and whatever their income. The medical records which have been kept by local doctors and hospitals throughout the twentieth century have listed every visit and every treatment made in the country. This wealth of data has consequently remained within the public domain and can now serve as an important reservoir of knowledge for many different research projects. To be a doctor in Iceland has always been seen as a public service and society as a whole felt that it was responsible for the care and treatment given to those in need.

Secondly, this nature of the Icelandic health service created a strong culture of trust between doctors and the public. The goodwill shown by the people towards the medical profession has been extraordinary and consequently Icelanders have been very open and willing to participate in many different medical research projects, provide private information, blood and bio samples that in many other countries would have led to complicated privacy laws or extensive formal contracts. This culture of trust has enabled Icelandic doctors and other scientists to engage freely in many different types of research and the nation has rejoiced in the results which have been achieved, almost as if they are national achievements.

Thirdly, we have 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. Thus Icelandic doctors have studied and worked in the United States, in England, Sweden and elsewhere and on returning home they have created a specialized community which is continuously being nourished by inputs from many different institutions and countries whereas in larger societies there is a tendency to train exclusively within one's own country. We have managed to be at one and the same time strongly Icelandic and truly international in our approach.

In addition the lack of extensive bureaucracy in our country, mainly because we don't have enough people to fill all the posts in big bureaucratic corridors of power, and also the personal nature of prevailing social contacts, have enabled young scientists and new research companies to establish extensive networks of cooperation with ministries and local authorities, hospital management and other administrative agencies. The pace of scientific discovery has consequently become quicker and the dialogue with the participants more relaxed and constructive.

In the field of research into sleep and wakefulness, rest and mental health, these characteristics have been of considerable importance and enabled us to become active partners in international scientific

cooperation. By hosting the 16th Congress of the European Sleep Research Society here in Iceland we also express our determination to continue this journey of discovery for the benefit of all.

Our knowledge of human nature is still clouded by darkness although incredible progress has indeed been made. The mind is among the greatest wonders of creation and how it rests and is refreshed and nourished is of great importance to us all.

I hope that the spirit and openness of Iceland, the sense of the everyday creation that our country provides, will bring stimulation and freshness to your discussions and your congress will consequently strengthen our knowledge and capabilities, how we can enjoy the wonders of being alive and wide awake, how as humans we can marvel at the beauty which is the gift of every day, how the ever-changing light reminds us of the splendour of the creation.

Our small island is blessed with providing such insights and I hope it will also inspire your discussions and deliberations long after you have returned to your homes.