



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of
the Health Technology and Science Exhibition
Kópavogur
19 June 2002**

Ladies and Gentlemen

The creative forces which are constantly transforming the nature of Iceland – the volcanic eruptions, the expanding lava fields, islands emerging out of the sea, the moving geysers, the earthquakes, the ever-changing contrast between fire and ice – all manifest that the Almighty is still at work on the creation of Iceland although the Old Testament maintains that God's work was finished after the first six days.

It is both a humbling and a stimulating experience to live in such a country and we hope that our friends and visitors from abroad find it inspiring to share in our enjoyment.

The creativity which nature demonstrates all over Iceland has also moulded the souls and the culture of the people and thus in recent decades led to many innovations and pioneering projects in the fields of science and technology. Together with our friends in Northern Europe we are proud to be in the forefront in the development of the high-tech information society of the 21st century.

The Health Technology and Science Exhibition which opens here today is a manifestation of how active cooperation can lead to remarkable progress in medicine and health-related technology. It also provides many examples of recent scientific achievements. The exhibition is a wide-ranging forum which demonstrates the active role played by our nations in the scientific progress of mankind.

The achievements by doctors, researchers, scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs in the development of better health care and in the treatment of some of the most difficult diseases of our times are indeed

remarkable and at the outset of the 21st century we are blessed with better prospects in this field than all previous generations.

The social and economic trends which now influence our communities endow an ever-growing importance upon the health sector. We are living longer and the proportion of the elderly in the population is constantly increasing; we are more demanding with respect to treatment and care and the expenditures in this field, both private and public, have become a major part of national income.

The importance of discoveries and scientific progress will therefore keep on growing and the scope for business innovation and entrepreneurial skills will be an important part of the future profile of the health sector.

The exhibition which opens here today is an important demonstration of the contribution made by the nations in northern Europe and shows that our societies have indeed become promising laboratories for the development of new technologies and scientific progress.

Although the Icelandic nation is small it can offer some important lessons for others to contemplate, lessons drawn from the journey we have made from being one of the poorest countries in Europe into being now among the most affluent in the world, lessons on how a society of farmers and fishermen became so technologically advanced that Iceland is now a prime example of a highly developed information society with top scores in mobile phone penetration, Internet usage and personal computer ownership.

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. 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.

It is therefore with great pleasure that we welcome the opportunity provided by this exhibition to view technology and scientific progress from a wider perspective. We are given here splendid proof of how effective our nations can be in the new economy of the 21st century, an economy in which the service industries, information technology and the creative capacities of the educated work force will be the driving forces.

I hope the exhibition will inspire us to continue to be innovative and entrepreneurial in this field and it is with praise for the spirit of creation which is so abundantly on display here today that I hereby declare the Health Technology and Science Exhibition open.