



Address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the 4th ISAM Annual Meeting
and the SÁÁ 25th Anniversary Conference
3rd October 2002

Distinguished delegates
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a particular pleasure for me to welcome you all to the 4th Annual Meeting of the International Society of Addiction Medicine and the 25th SÁÁ Anniversary Conference, and to applaud the presence of distinguished scientists, academics, researchers and other Addiction Medicine workers from many parts of the world who are visiting Iceland to join us in paying tribute to the remarkable contribution that SÁÁ has made to the treatment of addiction in our country.

The struggle by individuals, families and communities against the plagues of alcohol and drug addiction is a heart-rending experience for anyone who needs to take part in this tough battle with the almost indescribable sacrifices it involves. Calls for help have been made, full of desperation and resignation, and the friends and families of victims have had to suffer tremendous strain, shocks that have often broken down those nearest and dearest.

When SÁÁ, the Icelandic association, was founded 25 years ago, it represented a unique gesture of cooperation between difference social forces: Labour union leaders and employers who had clashed over pay conditions and faced each other in fierce strikes joined forces in the service of this new cause, influential figures from opposing political parties who for decades had only talked to each other in public debate now stood side by side to support this new association, the high and the low, people from all classes, impoverished fishermen and workers who had been drinking for decades and wealthy executives from Iceland's largest companies, poets and artists, old and young – in effect a cross-section of Icelandic society shook off the fetters of convention and

announced in powerful voices: Enough! We are here, all in the same boat, and we intend to help each other and support those who need to be saved.

Devoted doctors and experienced nurses then undertook to be in charge of the day-to-day work, drawing on experience and cooperation from far and wide, but largely needing to rely on their own abilities to find their way along a path that few had ventured before. In effect this was completely groundbreaking work from the viewpoint of science, theories of treatment and community help, and also by fostering understanding among financial and healthcare management that it was justified to allocate public funds towards saving people whom many thought should simply kick the habit of alcohol or other drugs by their own efforts alone.

At this milestone in the history of SÁÁ when we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Icelandic Association in the service of Addiction Medicine, I would like to salute these pioneers and thank them for their indefatigable campaigning and the great sacrifices they have made, but above all for the guidance they gave to our nation, for opening the eyes of the general public and the authorities in order to create a profound understanding of the most fruitful way to tackle the plague of alcohol and drug addiction, the most fruitful way for individuals and families, the most fruitful way for society, indeed, for the entire nation.

People who have worked in the field of addiction medicine in our country – the doctors, researchers, nurses and instructors – have to all intents and purposes brought about a social revolution, such has been their impact on the way we Icelanders now think about and discuss these issues. There is also good reason to thank the thousands of people who have helped SÁÁ in its social work, fundraising and voluntary activities – that great team includes many lifelong teetotallers who have wanted to lend less fortunate people a helping hand.

Icelanders are proud of the work SÁÁ has been doing and I hope that during this anniversary year you will all feel the nation's support and heartfelt gratitude, the congratulations that urge you on to even greater deeds.

Although in many ways SÁÁ reflects the community spirit and cultural heritage that characterize Icelandic society in our day and age, the international aspect of its work has always been strong, emphasizing cooperation with doctors and scientists in other countries, drawing on the rich stock of experience of those who have tackled similar problems elsewhere in the world, and at the same time mediating the knowhow acquired here.

It is therefore very apt to organize the Annual Meeting of the International Society of Addiction Medicine simultaneously with this event and invite distinguished scholars to give lectures on and discuss recent discoveries in this field and the most pressing problems faced today by practitioners of treatment in other countries.

Many people over the past decades have supported us Icelanders in this field and without strong international cooperation we would hardly have been able to achieve the results we have. I convey to you here today special thanks from the whole Icelandic nation and I hope that you sense how deeply we appreciate your friendship and your keenness to cooperate with us.

Despite the great advances that have been made in theoretical knowledge and empirical treatment, and the vast energy that is being devoted to preventive action, we still face the deep-rooted problem that ever younger people are falling prey to alcohol and drugs, and the activities of the dealers who profit from selling drugs are continually growing. Treatment which was originally aimed in particular at people who had reached middle age must now focus more and more on young people who ought to have almost all their lives ahead of them.

We must have the determination and courage to force the authorities and those responsible for strategic planning and allocation of resources in the public interest to face up to this growing problem and establish a broad consensus in society about preventive measures.

We also know now that preventive action is not just something that we entrust to experts, but cultivate among ourselves: in the home, in the family and in the school. Spending time with our children, taking part in their games, hobbies and sporting activities is the main way to produce preventive action which has lasting results. Surveys show that young people who have enjoyed the daily companionship of their parents, young people who practice sports and enjoy a secure and solid home are much more likely to escape the perils of alcohol and drugs. The defence is therefore within ourselves. It is human togetherness which offers the best way of saving others.

Although hospitals and rehabilitation centres will continue to play a key role and contributions by experts and skilled personnel will be the mainstay activity, social responsibility still needs to be strong, and the Icelandic experience, the origins and achievements of SÁÁ, testify to what can be done when people from different walks of life join forces, when the will to act spawns a genuine nationwide campaign.

I thank the leaders of SÁÁ and all its members for their energetic work over a quarter of a century and hope that we can continue to enjoy this rewarding cooperation with experts from other countries.

We have great expectations of your deliberations and decisions at the conference which I now declare open and we hope that the dialogue here in Iceland will further the progress of Addiction Medicine in the years to come.