



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at NOBAB conference
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Distinguished guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Just over sixty years ago, women in Reykjavík launched their campaign for the construction of a children's hospital and the name of their society – Hringurinn or the Circle – soon became a symbol of care and vision, of emphasis on children's welfare and new priorities in healthcare.

Year after year, for decades, they collected money, sold badges, arranged entertainments, theatre productions, dances, auctions and other fundraising efforts to make their dream come true. The richness of their imagination knew no bounds. Their energy and stamina were admirable. And of course they also approached the leaders of society, lobbied cabinet ministers and governments, enlisted the support of the whole nation.

At the beginning of the new century they – and all of us – had occasion to celebrate when a new children's hospital was opened in Reykjavík, splendid facilities with state-of-the-art equipment and an exceptionally talented and specialised team of doctors and nurses who handled the day-to-day operations.

It was with great pride that we showed Queen Silvia of Sweden the new children's hospital on her visit with King Karl Gustaf and Crown Princess Victoria earlier this week. Women's dreams that began as an idealistic campaign more than sixty years ago had now become part of the programme for a royal visit.

I mention this here to remind us that the special status of children within the health system has not always been recognised and that it took an association of female campaigners, women from all walks of life who

had no position within the health system, to stir others into awareness about the need for such reforms. These idealists decided to raise the banner aloft, move forward and establish a new order, an order that entailed changed priorities for the benefit of children.

The history of the children's hospital in Reykjavík is an impressive indication of how strong a part non-government organisations can play in health service reforms, how social values need to underlie construction programmes and allocation of funds, how the policies adhered to by governments have to move in pace with the will of the people, how the health system must not be a fortress controlled solely by the high and mighty: it must also be open to democratic pressure, to the influence of campaigners who dream of a better order.

The Icelandic experience, the history of a remarkable struggle lasting sixty years, the success story that a group of dedicated women achieved, can in many ways serve as illustrations and rich resources in discussing Nordic experience, in considering the problems faced by families with chronically ill children, how to support them better and identify more closely the challenges they often suddenly have to tackle, the setbacks that mark the beginning of a difficult and long-lasting experience.

The interaction between the health service and the community, and their families to address the complex problems accompanying diseases, is truly a pressing topic that calls for dialogue involving numerous people with different educational backgrounds, diverse experience and new vision, and also the people who themselves suffer these tribulations and in addition the children and the young people who are the victims of these diseases.

Let us not forget that comments and suggestions of the young, their fresh vision can often draw attention to what older people have stopped noticing or have been too set in their ways to understand the need to change.

Was it not the child in the folktale by H. C. Andersen who dared to say what everyone knew but no one had the courage to say it out loud? Perhaps the health service, like the Emperor in his new clothes, also needs children and young people to be called in to bear witness.

I know that such is the spirit of your deliberations and fresh vision, the essence of your dialogues and consultations, and I wish you every success.

We need to pose questions – also we in the Nordic countries, which many people in the world regard as model societies – pose questions candidly and with commitment, ask what has to be changed so we can collectively create a better life for the young.

I know that you will be asking precisely such questions and hopefully the answers will produce improvements and progress in the years to come.