



**Address by  
the President of Iceland  
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson  
at the  
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Distinguished doctors,  
Scientists, health-care officials,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

May I begin by welcoming you all to Iceland and express the view that the conference will be characterized by a creative dialogue and significant medical progress. Perhaps the creativity so abundant in Icelandic nature will inspire your deliberations.

We all know the account given in the opening of the Bible where it is described how God created the Earth in six days and then decided to rest because the work was finished. There is, however, one problem with this description. It is not entirely accurate, because when it came to the creation of Iceland the Almighty became so fascinated with the possibilities that the creation has continued in our country until this very day: with new volcanoes, new lava fields, new islands, new geysers, earthquakes and other activity reminding us that we are still able to bear witness to the creation.

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, technology and health based services and industry. Together with our friends in Northern Europe we are proud to be at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the forefront of developing health technology.

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 we now seem to be 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.

It is among the most interesting aspects of modern Iceland how in the field of health technology our society has become a promising laboratory 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 Icelanders 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.

For all these reasons, Iceland is perhaps well suited to be a partner in scientific cooperation within many different medical disciplines and I sincerely hope that the spirit and the openness of our country, the sense of everyday creation that Iceland provides, will bring stimulation and freshness to your discussions and your congress will consequently strengthen our knowledge and capabilities.

At the crossroads where the continents meet we are reminded that we all share in the fate that the creative forces of nature have in store for us, that it is in true service to one another that our humanity excels.