



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the
at The 5th Nordic Conference
on Research on Autism Spectrum Disorders
Reykjavík
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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 help to 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.

The achievements by doctors, researchers, scientists, innovators, social workers 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 than all previous generations.

It is an historic occasion when the first conference specifically devoted to autism is held in Iceland. Appropriately, it is taking place on the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the Icelandic Autistic Society.

We welcome a distinguished gathering of scientists and researchers to our country and are encouraged by the progress which your dialogue has created in recent years.

We have gradually succeeded in raising public understanding of autism to a new and more positive level. Our societies have started to face up to the challenges created by those who suffer from autism and by their families.

Fortunately, when addressing these challenges, the Nordic nations can draw on a sound tradition of welfare and social services which provides us with guidelines for how to progress.

In this evolution it is fundamentally important that action and system improvements should be based on a solid foundation of research and scientific discovery.

Welcoming you here today also provides me with an opportunity to praise the progress which has been made in recent years towards a broader and more solid public understanding of autism; and also to provide a brief explanation of why Iceland can be a fertile field for scientific progress in many areas of medical research.

We can in this country draw on significant historical examples of how, through public debate and democratic dialogue, sustained information campaigns, active citizens' involvement and strong cooperation between specialists and well known public figures and community leaders, dramatic transformation was brought about in social policies and public attitudes, paving the way for concrete changes which in the long run tremendously improved the general health situation.

We can cite lessons from the campaign against tuberculosis in the 1930s to the 1950s, the campaign against heart diseases in the 1960s to the 1970s and the campaign against alcoholism in the 1980s to the 1990s and in recent years from campaigns with respect to other diseases. In each and every case the linking of public involvement to the best available expert knowledge was the key to success.

I am aware that many scientists and doctors see their field as exclusively restricted to the territory within the walls of laboratories, hospitals or their respective health institutions, but I fundamentally believe that only by making our nations more informed, more enlightened and more understanding, and thus reducing fear and prejudice, can we

contribute substantially to improved mental health and the general well-being of all.

Sustained success can only be achieved through active involvement by all of you in the necessary democratic dialogue and by every doctor, scientist, expert and participant in the field seeing it as his or her duty to play an active part in the creation and maintenance of such a public movement.

In this respect the active involvement by doctors and experts in the campaigns against tuberculosis, heart diseases and alcoholism in the last century and the extraordinary success of those initiatives offers us both inspiration and guidelines, and the Icelandic experience in these historic campaigns brings us many lessons of relevance to the problems we face.

To be a doctor in the Nordic countries has always been seen as a public service and our societies have felt that they were responsible for the care and treatment given to those in need. The nature of our health service has created a strong culture of trust between doctors and the public. This culture enables doctors and scientists to engage freely in different types of research, and combine it with access to universities, medical research institutes and hospitals in other countries for further and more specialised results.

May I also mention that the lack of extensive bureaucracy in my country, mainly because we do not 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 doctors, young scientists and researchers to establish extensive networks of cooperation with hospital management, ministries and local authorities and thus the pace of scientific discovery can become quicker and the dialogue with the participants and their families more constructive.

All these characteristics are highly relevant in furthering the progress of autism research and therefore it is very inspiring that the Nordic Conference now takes place for the first time in Iceland, that your meeting coincides with important anniversaries, both the 30th anniversary of the Icelandic Autism Society and the 10th Anniversary of the Division of Autism and Communication Disorders of the State Diagnostic and Counselling Center. For us your conference is an important milestone and provides bases for significant contributions to further progress.

Iceland is privileged to be a partner in your scientific cooperation and I sincerely hope that the spirit and the openness of my country, the sense of everyday creation that the Icelandic nature provides, will bring stimulation and freshness to your discussions, that your congress will

consequently strengthen our knowledge and capabilities and thus help to improve the service to those who suffer from autism and also to their families and friends.