



**Address by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the meeting
“Health Technology meets Innovative Iceland”
Stockholm
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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.

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.

This meeting organized by the Trade Council of Iceland is a clear manifestation of how active cooperation can lead to remarkable progress in medicine, hospital management and health-related technology. It will also provide many examples of recent scientific achievements and new products made by nine Icelandic companies, some of whom are among the world market leaders in their field.

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 meeting this morning and the presentations by the companies are an important demonstration of the contribution made by Iceland in the field of health technology and shows that our society has indeed become a promising laboratory for the development of new technologies and scientific progress in this field.

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 people in Iceland 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 meeting to present examples of health technology, health products and health care solutions developed in Iceland and discuss the possibilities of cooperation and joint ventures in this field between the Icelandic companies and health care professionals and investors in Sweden.