



**An address
by
the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of
The 41st Nordic Lung Congress
Reykjavík
4 June 2003**

Distinguished doctors,
scientists,
health-care professionals
and other guests

When we welcome the Nordic Lung Congress here today I am reminded of how as a young boy I experienced the profound community spirit which characterised the struggle against tuberculosis in our country more than half a century ago.

My mother had suffered from the disease for almost a decade, and lost eleven ribs in an operation to strengthen her chances of survival – and when I visited her at the hospital on the outskirts of Reykjavík I sensed the deep personal commitment by doctors and nurses to each and every patient, a commitment which prompted the leading Icelandic doctors in the field to create a national movement dedicated to uprooting the disease and providing long-term services for those who had suffered.

Our doctors and nurses defined their role not only in terms of the hospital duties but also to provide leadership for society as a whole – through action they defined their democratic responsibilities.

To be a doctor in Iceland has always been seen as a public service and society as a whole has felt that it was responsible for the care and treatment given to those in need. The nature of the Icelandic health service has 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 were national achievements.

We have also 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, 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 doctors, scientists and research companies to establish extensive networks of cooperation with hospital management, ministries and local authorities and thus the pace of scientific discovery has become quicker and the dialogue with the participants more relaxed and constructive.

The history of our fight against tuberculosis in the first half of the 20th century is full of such important lessons but it should also challenge us to be more aggressive against another killer disease which every year takes a heavy toll of our societies but is nurtured and protected by social traditions, strong market forces and vested financial interests.

Let me be perfectly frank in this distinguished company. I have never been able to understand why associations of doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals are not in the vanguard of the fight against smoking, as many Icelandic doctors decades ago were against tuberculosis in its day. Don't as many people die from smoking today – yes, perhaps many more than died from tuberculosis in the past? And doesn't it serve the interests and operations of the health system to curb the cause that creates this disease?

Many people regard smoking as an innocent pursuit which harms no one except perhaps smokers themselves. Nonetheless, reports say that as many Icelanders die each year for this reason as if two large passenger jets were to crash between Iceland and Copenhagen. We can imagine

what would be said if, at regular intervals of six months, a jet full of passengers were to be lost on that route. And let us not forget that many of our best-loved singers and musicians have died of lung cancer even though they never smoked, only played for decades in smoky dancehalls.

It is a worthy precedent that you are setting here at the 41st Nordic Lung Congress, to devote a significant amount of time to discussing how to cure people of smoking and make them stop altogether. A successful battle against smoking is the action that would lead to financial benefits on an unparalleled scale in the operation of the health system and release funds that could be allocated towards fighting other difficult diseases. I have been told that one-third of all health service costs in the United States are on account of diseases that can be directly or indirectly attributed to smoking.

So there is much at stake and I urge you all to be in the forefront of the worldwide campaign against smoking in the years to come. Let us be resolute and show the world that Gro Harlem Brundtland is not the only Nordic champion of the anti-smoking.

With these words I welcome you all to Iceland and wish you success in the noteworthy work of your congress. It is a great honour for us to host the Nordic Lung Congress and I hope that the creative forces which are constantly at work in our country will also inspire your discussions and 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 be witnesses to the creation.

I hope that the constantly changing theatre of light and colours which is on display in our country will provide you with inspiration and enjoyment and the spectacle which the Almighty has bestowed upon Iceland will encourage you all to seek new discoveries and achievements. I hope you will all enjoy fruitful and productive days and it gives me great pleasure to declare the 41st Nordic Lung Conference hereby opened.