



Speech
by
the President of Iceland
Guðni Th. Jóhannesson
at the
Nordic Network of Fetal Medicine Annual Meeting
Reykjavík
3 May 2018

Dear guests,

I welcome you all to this conference. You have gathered here in Iceland to discuss advances in medical science, more particularly in fetal medicine. In this country we have long cherished and valued those who wanted to heal people. In the middle ages, Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson was among the island's most famous medics. Hrafn would not eat or sleep when sick people came for help, he never sought payment for his services and he was widely praised for his wisdom and kindness.

But Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson lived during dangerous times in Iceland, an era of civil strife. In 1213, he was assassinated, beheaded by a bitter enemy. The law too was harsh in those years. With the adoption of Christianity around the year 1000, the killing of unwanted infants through exposure had gradually been outlawed, but all available evidence suggests that a child born with visible disabilities was still not welcome; it was to be left to die, either before or after baptism.

Needless to say, today we live in a better world. Here in Iceland, we enjoy peace and prosperity. People live longer than in most countries, not least because of a decent health service, advanced medical treatments and excellent staff. And while we have our harrowing tales of neglect and cruelty towards disabled children in living memory, they now enjoy the same legal rights and protection that we all deserve.

In Iceland, as in the other Nordic countries, we value progress, innovation, and discovery. We benefit from the fruits of research and collaboration, the exchange of ideas and information. That is why a conference of this kind is important, that is why a body like the Nordic Network of Fetal Medicine is important, with its emphasis on close collaboration in the Nordic region. But you know this better than I do. And together we also know that despite all our positive developments – and in fact because of them – we are faced with complex ethical issues.

We must not shy away from difficult discussions and debates. I am glad that you devote a significant section of this conference to ethics. Yet, the views of those outside the medical and scientific communities must be also be taken into account in all deliberations about this multifaceted matter.

The importance and role of fetal medicine is clear: To improve and manage the health of the mother and fetus during pregnancy and delivery. We already know how advances in this field can save lives. We also know how general progress in medical science has benefitted humankind. These truths must be considered when we discuss the ethics of prenatal screening and diagnosis. At the same time, women and couples should always receive balanced and unbiased information about the results of such tests.

It is our duty to promote a society of equal rights for all, a society of non-discrimination, inclusion and compassion. I wish you all success in your valuable work.