



Address
by the President of Iceland
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
at the opening of the
”Fifth Nordic Conference for Medical and Health Libraries”
2nd June 1999

Distinguished delegates

The theme of the Nordic Conference for Medical and Health Libraries concerns their evolution in the new millennium, how information services and the distribution of knowledge will bring new requirements, and whether traditional approaches to the operation of libraries for the benefit of experts and the public alike are in fact undergoing such fundamental transformation that methods and practices moulded by custom over the centuries now need to be re-examined in radical ways.

The generation attending this distinguished conference is perhaps the last one to be brought up in the belief that libraries are warehouses storing knowledge and expertise, that universities and research institutions, hospitals and laboratories could not function without the extensive services provided by fully equipped and adequately housed libraries.

I recently visited a kindergarten here in Iceland where 4-year-old children operated computers with such skill that even though they could not read they easily went on the Internet, sent drawings by e-mail to their homes and used a CD-ROM disc which is designed to enable them to read without the help of a teacher. This experience made me reflect on the demands this new generation will ultimately make towards universities and traditional research institutions and libraries when they enter such establishments of advanced learning.

We all know that it is now technically possible to reach the highest form of learning, to conduct research and scientific discussions, without ever setting foot in the buildings which house the traditional institutions

of learning: the universities, the libraries and the research centres. If we require books we now order them by e-mail and have them delivered to us by courier mail. Thus we can enjoy the beauty of the countryside and the tranquillity of the farmhouse while working at the forefront of modern scientific knowledge.

If such a lifestyle is now possible for scholars and researchers, how will knowledge be stored and transmitted for the benefit of future generations which have been brought up by using the kindergarten computer centre before they even have any idea of what kind of a phenomenon the traditional library really is?

The themes of the Fifth Nordic Conference for Medical and Health Libraries are therefore both timely and of the utmost significance.

They also relate to important questions concerning the rights of patients to be informed about their diseases and the alternative methods of treatment available at different medical institutions, as well as the effects and side-effects of different drugs or pharmaceutical products.

Or to put it in a different and perhaps a more challenging way: How are patients to be given access to the relevant information which helps them understand the imperfection of medical knowledge and the risks associated with respective methods of treatment – especially since hospital authorities and medical officials are increasingly requesting patients to sign declarations which state that they have a so-called full understanding of the risks involved and will consequently not undertake legal proceedings if the treatment fails?

How are the human rights of patients ranked in the order of priorities when the information services of the future are being planned?

It is thus important to raise the question of how medical and health libraries will be adapted to meet these fundamental rights of patients for information and understanding, or whether libraries will continue to be primarily organised in such a way as to serve above all the interests of researchers, doctors and other members of the health professions.

If hospital authorities increasingly request patients to sign away their rights in order to safeguard the doctors and other hospital staff, how are we to make sure that the patients do so with full knowledge of the issues involved? Is the patient's right to secure his or her life in a fully informed way not at least as important as the doctor's or hospital's needs to secure their financial interests in case of legal actions, if not more so? How can

medical and health libraries be transformed and reorganised in order to secure open access for patients and their families to all the relevant information regarding different diseases and methods of treatment?

Thus at the dawn of the new millennium, medical and health libraries will be at the core of the most crucial questions concerning the place of human rights within the health institutions of the future.

I therefore welcome the challenging agenda of the Fifth Nordic Conference and encourage you all to enter without hesitation into this profound debate, to participate in the crucial attempt to balance the different elements characterising the new world which has been created by technical innovations, the information revolution, the requirements of the medical and health professions, and last but not least the growing concern and emphasis on preserving the human rights of everyone, whether cured or in the process of being treated, whether on the road to health or facing death from incurable disease.

I wish you inspiration and benefit from your deliberations and declare the Fifth Nordic Conference for Medical and Health Libraries hereby opened.