

Welcome remarks by Niina Koivuviita, President, Finnish Medical Association at WMA General Assembly Ceremonial Session, 18 October 2024

WMA leadership, esteemed colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

The health sector and its ability to respond to current and future challenges relies strongly on medical research, development and innovation. These, in turn, rely on an overall high level of education, specialized competences and close collaboration between academia, hospitals, research organizations and the pharma industry.

Especially in clinical research maintaining a positive public attitude to and trust in research is another key factor. This brings us to the Declaration of Helsinki, which has for 60 years and through numerous updates set the standards for ethical practices in medical research involving human subjects.

Indeed, medical research advances by looking into previously unknown or inaccessible processes, interactions and phenomena. Our ethical guidelines must, therefore, be both unyielding in the protection they offer and able to respond to our evolving operating environment.

Finland has a long tradition of investing in health-related research. This focus has propelled our research to the global forefront. We have a stated national goal of being a trailblazer in personalized medicine and health care, and a top performer in medical research and innovation.

This is also necessary, as medical and health care research are seen as essential contributors to a cost-efficient social and health care system, a major issue – or rather the major issue - in current Finnish politics. The long trend of marked advances with relatively small increases in funding which we saw from the 1970's onwards has plateaued out.

Now we need significant investment just to maintain the level we are at. Research and innovation are the tools with which we strive to do better with less.

Equality and equity, the themes of yesterday's Scientific Session, offer relevant guideposts also in research. One concrete example is research into cardiovascular disease, where men are strongly overrepresented in study populations, yet the treatment protocols are applied to both male and female patients with potentially suboptimal outcomes.

Rapidly advancing digitalization is driving change also in medical research and innovation. Artificial intelligence, gene and nanotechnologies and virtual and added reality will all play a part in personalized health care and therapies. Innovative uses of telehealth solutions are seen as a way to respond to an increasing need for services.

Medical research and innovation are becoming increasingly open and interdisciplinary. We must cultivate a strategic awareness and agility in responding to signals and in operating within international research networks.

Finland has some particular assets when it comes to medical research and innovation activity. Firstly, we have an international reputation for being a research-oriented and innovative nation with modern and high-quality health care services. We must not neglect to allocate sufficient – preferably even ample – resources to broad and varied medical research as this provides the fertile ground from which innovation grows.

Secondly, we have excellent and comprehensive, up to date register population data which can be used and combined by researchers to discover correlations and causalities. For example, a recent study utilized national health register data to look at the efficiency of high-dose influenza vaccines in reducing hospitalizations for over 65-year-olds. Even though the study was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, the results obtained attest to the opportunities offered by our unique register data and research capabilities.

Thirdly, our entire society is based on strong trust. This trust is an invaluable lubricant in all health care encounters as well as in securing voluntary research participation by the public. The recent large-scale reorganization of our public health care system has caused a decrease in the level of trust in our system's ability to provide for all and according to need. We need to focus on earning and maintaining this trust with consistent reliability and transparency.

In terms of medical research, trust is extremely valuable. The ethical soundness of the process and the clear reporting of results must be paired with timely and accessible communication to the public. Misinformation on health themes is rife, especially on social media outlets. Disinformation may be used for a variety of reasons to erode faith in the ability of medical research to correctly identify causes and treatments for illness and disease.

The relevance of medical research and innovation grows from the benefits it yields. We need close collaboration and information sharing to translate these into better care and better health for all.

Thank you.