

**SPEECH BY H.E. MARIE LOUISE COLEIRO PRECA, PRESIDENT OF MALTA, AT
THE 6TH MEDITERRANEAN NEUROSCIENCE SOCIETY CONFERENCE 2017
ORGANISED BY THE MEDITERRANEAN SOCIETY HOSTED BY MALTA
NEUROSCIENCE NETWORK AND UNIVERSITY OF MALTA**

MONDAY 12 JUNE 2017

**Prof. Alfred Vella, Rector of the University of Malta
Profs Giuseppe Di Giovanni, President of the 2017 MNS Meeting
Distinguished participants
Dear friends**

Il-ġurnata t-tajba, u merħba f'Malta!

It is my pleasure to welcome you to Malta, for the 6th Mediterranean Neuroscience Conference.

While I augur you a most constructive and successful conference, I do hope you will also have some time to enjoy the rich cultural and historical heritage of our islands.

Let me begin by congratulating the Mediterranean Neuroscience Society, and the Malta Neuroscience Network of the University of Malta, and your collaborators, for organising this important conference.

I am informed that there are approximately 350 delegates, participating in this conference, including many students.

I feel very privileged to be among the brains of the Mediterranean region, and the world, while you are focusing your attention on the incredible power of the human brain!

It is reassuring to note that, thanks to these conferences over the years, you have gone beyond sharing good practices.

In fact, you have also developed strong friendships, and created new opportunities for dialogue and connection.

In today's world, where conflicts and uncertainty seem to be of constant concern, especially within the Mediterranean region, this kind of relationship-building is very essential.

In fact, I would like to commend you, for giving visibility to another side of the Mediterranean region, as a place where knowledge is being nurtured, wisdom is being gained, and progress is being promoted, in the field of neuroscience.

I believe that we need to give more attention to neuroscience, now, more than ever before, because, as we all know, mental and neurological disorders are an area of increasing concern.

The World Health Organisation tells us that one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders, at some point or other in their lives.

Moreover, we are told that, mental and neurological disorders are among the leading causes of ill-health and disability, worldwide.

These indicators make it very clear that the work you are doing is indispensable.

I feel proud to be here amongst you, because your sector is transforming the quality of life, for countless people, through medical innovations and increased expertise.

However, I believe that such advancements can only achieve the best results, when scientists and researchers are willing to share their breakthroughs with one another.

I believe that progress can only occur when the scientific community extends itself, beyond the confines of individual institutions, by transcending the borders of our nations.

Progress only occurs when we work together, in truly collaborative ways, at national, regional, and global levels.

Progress only occurs when dialogue among diverse professionals, is encouraged and sustained, especially through strategies for science diplomacy.

When I say science diplomacy, I am referring to the process of collaboration, to achieve scientific and medical advances, for the benefit of our societies and nations.

Today's conference is a perfect example of how such diplomacy, through scientific dialogue and sharing, can take place.

Moreover, it is an example of the fundamental importance of relationship-building, which is the cornerstone of all peaceful, productive, and sustainable development.

Science diplomacy is crucial, to continue improving the lives of the citizens of the world.

Your breakthroughs and innovations should serve all humanity.

However, in this context, an important question comes to my mind – are all our authorities ensuring that your breakthroughs and innovations are made accessible to all humanity?

I would like to take this opportunity to urge all our authorities to ensure that the benefits of your work are made accessible to all their members of society, irrespective of who they are, and where they come from.

I am pleased to note that through your engagement, at this conference, you are openly sharing and building upon profound scientific knowledge, by which, you are strengthening the global community.

When you, as scientists, experts, and academics, share your learning, you send a strong message, that cooperation is more important than competition; that your connections are stronger than divisions; and that your commitment, to collaborative processes, is more powerful than the threat of conflict.

In this way, you are contributing to a culture of inclusive and participatory knowledge-building, which is a vital component of a healthy and sustainable culture of peace.

I believe that these collaborative processes must continue to take place...so that these collaborative processes, will value the unique contributions of stakeholders, from the Global North and the Global South.

I must note that, your collaboration is a strong contribution, to the implementation of the United Nations' Agenda 2030, and its Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, Goal Number 3, which prioritises health and wellbeing for all humanity.

In order to achieve this essential goal, your collaborations must embrace all experiences, expertise and good practices, from both shores of our Mediterranean region, and beyond.

Therefore, I urge you to do more to encourage greater synergies, between our respective universities and research centres.

In so doing, we can be secure, in the knowledge that we are working, together, for the greater good of all.

Undoubtedly, when we work together, our potential to achieve positive results grows.

When we work together, we show that, no matter our differences, we are united in the pursuit of the common good, and that we are united by common values, to reach a common goal.

These should be the values that define us - values that represent our determination, to be of service to others.

I urge you to be aware of the influence that our values have, and the effects that they have on patients and service-users, while receiving your support and care.

I believe that, in all sectors of human life, it is the dignity of the individual that must be our primary concern.

Respect for the dignity of one another must be the cornerstone of a global culture of peaceful collaboration, and the ethical foundation of all scientific and social development.

The level of dignity and respect we show to the vulnerable is a direct reflection of the solidarity that we need to continue to strengthen, within our communities and our societies.

Our focus on the dignity of others must also include wider strategies, within our nations, but also internationally. This approach will prioritise the holistic wellbeing of individuals and their families, who are living with chronic or life-long conditions.

Let me take an example...The ways that we respond to autism, and other neuro-developmental conditions, should be a reminder, that we need to be mindful of the ways that our societies are responding to the needs of these people.

In this context, some questions come to my mind;

In what ways are these people being included within society?

How is their participation being promoted and safeguarded?

How are we ensuring that they can enjoy a good quality of life and holistic wellbeing?

I urge you to discuss and evaluate our commitment to ensure full dignity to all, by emphasizing the need for effective social strategies, which promote the dignity of all people, and in this case, particularly people living with mental and neurological conditions.

Let me take this opportunity to emphasize that, the contributions of civil society, to safeguard human dignity, are essential.

By giving greater visibility for issues of mental and neurological health in your respective ways, you are being true activists of human dignity.

I urge you to continue to strengthen the connections you have created, as professionals and practitioners, with civil society organisations.

I believe that, it is vital that different stakeholders continue to come together, linking different countries, diverse disciplines, and specific sectors, together.

In this way, we shall be promoting a holistic approach to mental and neurological health.

Such a holistic approach leads to processes of reviewing, and potentially improving, legislation and policy, for the benefit of the 450 million people currently living with mental and neurological conditions.

Before concluding, let me share a few words with the students, present at this conference.

I am sure that this conference, will open up many opportunities for you.

You will meet leading figures in the field of neuroscience.

You will also have the chance to network with your peers and educators.

This is how dialogue among professionals begins.

It is important to make the most of these opportunities, even while you are still students.

I truly believe that, by working together, you will continue to promote safe spaces for scientific diplomacy. I am convinced that your cooperation and collaboration can be a driving force, to move science to new pastures, for the benefit of our global society.

I urge you to continue to commit yourselves to the wellbeing of all humanity, to ensure that the dignity of the human person will always be at the centre of all endeavours.

I urge you also to continue to value the lived experiences, and the specific narratives, of vulnerable individuals, through an inclusive and participative approach to healthcare.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to the outcomes of this conference.