
*'In Every Disability There is an Ability' Conference, Opening Address, delivered
by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, 12th May 2018*

[Salutations]

Dear friends,

I am pleased to share some brief opening remarks at today's importance conference, which is being facilitated by the ME, CFS and Fibromyalgia Alliance of Malta, in collaboration with European Network of Fibromyalgia Associates.

The title you have chosen; 'In Every Disability There is an Ability', is precisely the kind of empowering attitude that is necessary, in order to create more recognition and awareness around the lived realities of people, who are experiencing chronic pain conditions.

Moreover, this conference is sending a powerful statement about our united commitment, to safeguard the wellbeing of all people living with chronic pain.

Through my first-hand experience, listening to the experiences of people living with such conditions and their narratives, I believe that chronic pain must become a priority in our healthcare policies, both nationally, and at the widest possible European levels.

In this way, we will continue to push for proactive and effective change, for the benefit of individuals, their families, and our communities.

I am pleased to be informed that this is already taking place, with the establishment of a Fibromyalgia Clinic in Malta.

To ensure that our outreach is truly responding to the needs of chronic pain sufferers, we need to take our efforts to the next level. We must also ensure that people living with ME and CFS are not forgotten, or ignored.

This conference is making an important contribution, firstly, because it is highlight the vast numbers of people being affected by these conditions, and secondly, by creating and sustaining opportunities for connections between civil society activists around Europe.

Indicators from the International Association for the Study of Pain, and the European Pain Federation, state that one in five people suffer from moderate to severe chronic pain while one in three are unable, or less able, to maintain an independent lifestyle due to their pain.

The effect of their pain also means that one in four people report that their relationships, with family and friends, are severely strained.

According to Professor Harald Breivik, president of the European Pain Federation, we know that;

"Chronic pain is one of the most underestimated healthcare problems in the world today, causing major consequences for the quality of life of the sufferer, and a major burden on the healthcare system in the Western world." End quote.

Speaking about fibromyalgia specifically, data from the World Health Organisation says that its prevalence is between 3 and 6 percent of the global population.

We all know that people living with chronic pain are not only dealing with the pain itself, but also with uncertainty, discomfort, and confusion.

Often, people report feeling overwhelmed when they are dealing with their situation.

These factors can all contribute to a disabling effect on the individual, who is expected to continue to function in their places of work, their communities, and their societies, regardless of their ailments.

I believe that we must, first of all, encourage more knowledge about the underlying challenges faced by people living with chronic pain.

We must raise awareness about the fact, that our overall systems and institutions are not always responding, in an adequate and effective way, to the legitimate needs of people who are living with disabling conditions.

Such challenges have an even more particular importance, when we talk about the experiences of women and minority groups, who, as indicators show us, are primarily affected.

Pain is a worldwide problem. Studies from the World Health Organisation assert that 20 percent of adults suffer from pain, around the globe, and 10 percent are newly diagnosed with chronic pain each year.

There is a lack of research on chronic pain worldwide, and this is particularly evident in the Maltese context. The first study conducted in Malta, to focus on the voices of women with fibromyalgia, was carried out in 2015 by Angie Chircop Coleiro.

The study, entitled “Working with Fibromyalgia: The lived experience of women with fibromyalgia in the workplace”, states that, although many affected women said they were reluctant to be perceived as disabled, fibromyalgia has a clearly disabling effect on their lives.

I would like to quote from the study, which says that their condition is, *“a burden not just to them, but also on their families. Thus, they believe that gaining disability status can provide them with some form of official recognition, as well as financial aid.”* End quote.

All this indicates that we must promote issues of chronic pain as a matter of urgent importance, including to the medical community, by encouraging collaboration between medical professionals in Malta and the rest of Europe, to share good practices and encourage effective training.

On concluding, it is clear to all of us that chronic pain is, first and foremost, an issue of public health. Let me therefore urge our authorities, including the European Union, to incorporate more effective chronic pain health policies into all strategies for effective outreach.

In this context, I would like to emphasise that our action is urgent.

Let me encourage you to continue to create empowering spaces for people, struggling with chronic pain, to give a voice to their experiences.

We cannot allow anybody to feel alone, isolated, or ignored with their pain.

We must work together to continue improving our institutions, communities, and societies, to ensure that they respect the experiences of all our citizens.

Let us work together to ensure that this vulnerable group is truly included, and fully participates in society, so that they are given not only the dignity that they deserve, but also acknowledged for their potential, that each and every person, whoever they are, has.

Thank you for your attention.