
Opening Speech delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the National Patients' Organisation Launch, 23 April 2018

[Salutations]

Distinguished guests,
Dear friends.

It is my pleasure to deliver some opening remarks, at the launch of this important new initiative, the National Patients' Organisation of Malta.

Extending my patronage to such organisations, which are dedicated to improving the holistic wellbeing of the citizens of our Maltese Islands, has always been at the centre of this presidency.

In fact, the aims of your organisation are particularly dear to my heart, focusing on the empowerment of our communities. In the process, you are nurturing a much-needed sense of active and democratic citizenship.

I believe that the whole of our Maltese society is strengthened, when people experiencing challenges or vulnerabilities are provided with the opportunity to access the necessary support, in an effective and efficient manner.

For this reason, let me commend the steering committee of the National Patients' Organisation, and your collaborators, for creating such a powerful platform, to develop better synergies between civil society activists and our healthcare authorities.

I am informed that the founding members of the Organisation all have first hand experience of being patients in the national healthcare system.

Your voices are the ones we need to hear; your experiences are the ones that need to be brought to the fore, in order to more directly influence policy and inform our country's strategies for the future of person-centred healthcare.

I augur that you shall also develop strong links with similar organisations on a European, Mediterranean, and international level.

It is only by working with one another, and building mutually beneficial partnerships, that our societies will be enriched and the care received by patients, all across the world, will improve.

I believe it is vital for us to focus on the role of empowerment, particularly when it comes to patients and their experiences of care. Sustainable empowerment must take place at multiple levels of engagement, for it to become part of a culture of care that embraces our entire nation.

These include, first and foremost, a focus on individual empowerment. We can achieve this by ensuring that patients are involved, at each step of the way, about decisions concerning their care.

This is why organisations, such as your own, must continue to emphasise the need for personalised care, which takes into account the specific needs and requirements of each and every individual.

Furthermore, we must ensure that empowerment takes place at the level of service provision, and that patients are actively involved in taking important decisions about their own healthcare.

Every citizen should be aware about how and where services are being delivered; in what ways such services can be accessed most effectively; and the ways in which our national services are being implemented and reviewed by our authorities.

At the largest level of engagement, I believe that the experiences and narratives of patients should influence the underlying systems which are providing them with healthcare and support.

This level of empowerment is practically translated into grass-roots involvement, in all processes of strategic decision-making, including legislation, policy, and implementation.

Civil society organisations, such as your own, must have direct access to our policy-makers, whose decisions should reflect the lived realities of those whom they are duty-bound to serve.

Let me take this opportunity to quote a powerful remark, made by Robert Johnstone of the International Alliance of Patient Organisations, at the First European Conference on Patient Empowerment.

He said that, *“What needs to happen is for doctors to come down off their pedestal, and for patients to get up off their knees.”* End quote.

While I am certain that all of our healthcare professionals, in the Maltese Islands, are committed to providing the best quality of care that they can, we must acknowledge that there is a deficit in general knowledge and empowerment, when it comes to patients who seek to access the healthcare system.

For this reason, I am confident that today’s launch will create a safe and respectful space from which patients can gain valuable knowledge, engage in effective advocacy, and feel empowered to have their needs met.

Fundamentally, the empowerment of patients is an issue of universal human rights and the intrinsic dignity of the individual. The dignity of each and every person must be respected, at every level of society, especially at times of sickness, which bring added stress and vulnerability.

Let us also encourage further discussions about how our health systems can become more open to dialogue and collaborative care.

This is essential, because empowering patients does not only involve improving the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients. It is also about encouraging

individuals to take control of their own health, as equal and active partners in managing their healthcare options and choices, from a young age and throughout their lives.

Let me conclude by quoting the motto of your Organisation, “Empowering patients - working with, not for, patients.”

I believe that this sense of collaboration, respect, and dignity will guide the National Patients’ Organisation well, in the future, as a source of solidarity and empowerment for patients and their families across our Maltese Islands.

I augur you much success, and rest assured of my continuing support.

Thank you for your attention.