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Association Européenne pour les Soins Palliatifs
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Opening address by László Sólyom, President of the Republic of Hungary at the 10th Congress of the European Association for Palliative Care

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I am opening a conference of people who have committed themselves to helping others live a full and dignified life to the very end. Our civilisation has pushed birth, and not only birth, but death as well out of its natural place in the family and in the community. As society has become uneasy about death it has banished the dying behind the doors of hospital wards. In the face of this general attitude, however, you consider it your job to help the dying regain their dignity and experience the ultimate preciousness of life. And you not only help the dying to come out of isolation but also help their families to establish a relationship of acceptance and compassion with their terminally ill relatives, and later in their bereavement.

Civil groups first called the attention of society to the importance of palliative care a little over ten years ago in Hungary, and not much earlier in other countries of the world, and started to create the necessary institutions. This process is fully in line with the increased role of fundamental human rights of our era. The most fundamental of all human rights are the inseparable rights to life and to human dignity. In this respect, by recognising death once again as a natural part of life, the hospice movement advocates the two fundamental rights together, in unity.

All developed societies are rapidly aging, as a result of which – due to increased costs and an increased number of patients – health care systems find it increasingly hard to meet their responsibilities, especially as far as the humane aspect of medicine is concerned. The excruciating pain of cancer patients must be alleviated in a way that allows them to retain their full mental capacities. The dying must not be regarded a "problem" because they will be aware of such a treatment.

As a response to the withdrawal of families from care taking as well as to the overburden of health care institutions and to the inadequate hospital care for the dying, palliative care has been established and is improving in all European countries. Over the past two decades, a new care structure has evolved. Hospice, indeed, is a "shelter" providing the terminally ill with what is missing from other institutions: a place, time and competence.

I greatly appreciate the job you do as highly experienced, dedicated and cooperative professionals. I thank doctors, nurses, psychologists, physiotherapists, pastors, social workers and other professionals as well as volunteers for their efforts without which this system could not work. Similarly to you, I deeply believe that the last phase of life can be meaningful and insightful: all of us have only one life, and we only can live up to our full potential in this one life. It is never too late to understand this.

Those who come to know the hospice movement will see that the care and love the terminally ill and the dying need and receive in palliative care is a unique asset for the whole society. Indeed, it is society's vested interest to come to terms with death.

I wish all participants of the anniversary 10th Congress of the European Association for Palliative Care fortitude and endurance in their work and in promoting the underlying values.