

New benefit system in Britain forces sick and disabled into work

By Dennis Moore
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A recent report throws into sharp focus the terrible conditions faced each day by thousands of people claiming benefits in Britain. “Unfit for Purpose”, published by the Scottish Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB), examines the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) with new medical testing criteria introduced in November 2008 by the Labour government.

Part of the Labour government’s new proposals to get people “off benefit and back into work”, this new benefit replaces Incapacity Benefit and Income Support for those who are sick and unable to work.

The report highlights grave concerns regarding the implementation of this benefit and the subsequent removal of applicants who were found fit after attending Work Capability Assessments.

The CAB’s findings have highlighted areas of widespread abuses. Claimants report that they are not listened to at the Work Capability Assessments, and that supporting medical evidence is disregarded. In some cases the claimant’s actual answers at interviews are distorted. There have been particular concerns about people with mental health problems, as well as those with life threatening conditions.

Macmillan Cancer Support, a leading cancer charity working with people suffering from the disease, argues that people with a terminal illness should automatically be fast-tracked through the ESA. Yet they have reports of patients who are receiving intensive chemotherapy being ordered to attend Work Capability Assessments and Work Focussed Interviews.

The CAB reports on a woman in her 50s from South East England with cancer of the face who applied for ESA: “She was called for a work capability assessment before her treatment began. In the assessment she scored six points and was found fit to work, although

the medical examiner’s report stated that a return to work could only be considered after six months. Two weeks later she began oxygen therapy for five hours a day, four days a week. After this she was due to undergo surgery before further post-operative oxygen therapy”.

Under the previous rules, those claimants suffering from particular medical conditions could be exempted from attending a Personal Capability Assessment (PCA), as it was then called, if the claimant’s doctor could confirm the patient’s condition to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The new rules for the ESA Work Capability Assessment have limited the number of conditions that are subject to exemption by a claimant’s doctor.

These one-off assessments have been criticised as a blunt and inaccurate tool for assessing claimants with complex and fluctuating problems, often leading to people who are clearly unwell being found fit for work.

The Labour government had estimated that with the introduction of ESA and the Work Capability Assessment, there would be an increased number of claimants being found fit for work. The Personal Capability Assessment found approximately 37 percent of claimants fit for work. While under the new system the government had expected the percentage found fit for work would be approximately 50 percent, the figure has in fact risen to 68 percent. That is 31 percent higher than under the previous PCA rules and 18 percent higher than the government’s own estimation.

The Department for Work and Pensions anticipated that with the introduction of ESA there would be an expected 21,000 additional appeals. Statistics suggest this figure is up to 50,000 in the first year. This has had a significant impact on the already overstretched workload of advice/advocacy agencies.

The DWP expect 50 percent of claimants who appeal to be found fit for work. They are then moved onto Jobseekers Allowance, a benefit dependent on the claimant actively seeking work and accepting any work that is offered, however unsuitable.

The government intends to transfer all claimants, some 2.4 million people, to the new system by 2015. Five hundred doctors will carry out up to 10,000 assessments each week over the next five years. Hundreds of thousands of claimants will be affected, in effect being driven off sickness benefit.

The medical assessments are being carried out by Atos Origin Healthcare, a private company that was awarded a £500 million, seven-year contract in 2005 to deliver assessment and medical services for the DWP.

Atos has a history of failure and incompetence in delivering public services. In 2007 the *Manchester Evening News* reported that, after a series of blunders, health bosses had to recall up to 900 people in the North of England after they had undergone medical scans conducted by Atos, some for serious conditions. The company's contract, worth £257 million a year and set to provide 450,000 tests a year, was suspended as a result.

In November 2008, the *Independent* reported on the loss of confidential data by Atos on a memory stick that included data on an estimated 12 million people. The role of this company is just one example of the impact of privatisation of the welfare state that began under Labour and is to be continued under the current Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition.

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