

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

WAYNE SCOTT O'NEAL,

Plaintiff,

v.

WARDEN ROBERT MAY, et al.,

Defendants.

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: Civil Action No. 19-1953-RGA

Wayne Scott O'Neal, Sussex Correctional Institution, Georgetown, Delaware.
Pro Se Plaintiff.

MEMORANDUM OPINION

January 7, 2020
Wilmington, Delaware


ANDREWS, U.S. District Judge:

Plaintiff Wayne Scott O’Neal, an inmate at the Sussex Correctional Institution (“SCI”) in Georgetown, Delaware, filed this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. (D.I. 3). Plaintiff appears *pro se* and has been granted leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (D.I. 4). The Court proceeds to screen the Complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(a).

BACKGROUND

Plaintiff suffered a shoulder injury while exercising in June 2019. He has received some treatment and care but not an MRI or CAT scan even though he was told they are needed. The tests were not ordered because Defendant Dr. Sheri L McAfee-Garner has “a protocol to meet.” (D.I. 3 at 6). Plaintiff also alleges that physical therapy was ordered but he has yet to see a physical therapist. Finally, Plaintiff alleges that surgery is required.

Plaintiff availed himself of the prison grievance system, but indicates in the Complaint that at the time he commenced the action the grievance process was not completed. (*Id.* at 8).

SCREENING OF COMPLAINT

A federal court may properly dismiss an action *sua sponte* under the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b) if “the action is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.” *Ball v. Famiglio*, 726 F.3d 448, 452 (3d Cir. 2013). *See also* 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2) (*in forma pauperis* actions); 28 U.S.C. § 1915A (actions in which prisoner seeks redress from a governmental

defendant). The Court must accept all factual allegations in a complaint as true and take them in the light most favorable to a *pro se* plaintiff. *Phillips v. County of Allegheny*, 515 F.3d 224, 229 (3d Cir. 2008); *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 93 (2007). Because Plaintiff proceeds *pro se*, his pleading is liberally construed and his complaint, “however inartfully pleaded, must be held to less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.” *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. at 94.

An action is frivolous if it “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 325 (1989). Under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and § 1915A(b)(1), a court may dismiss a complaint as frivolous if it is “based on an indisputably meritless legal theory” or a “clearly baseless” or “fantastic or delusional” factual scenario. *Neitzke*, 490 U.S. at 327-28; *Wilson v. Rackmill*, 878 F.2d 772, 774 (3d Cir. 1989).

The legal standard for dismissing a complaint for failure to state a claim pursuant to § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii) and § 1915A(b)(1) is identical to the legal standard used when ruling on Rule 12(b)(6) motions. *Tourscher v. McCullough*, 184 F.3d 236, 240 (3d Cir. 1999). However, before dismissing a complaint or claims for failure to state a claim upon which relief may be granted pursuant to the screening provisions of 28 U.S.C. §§1915 and 1915A, the Court must grant Plaintiff leave to amend his complaint unless amendment would be inequitable or futile. *See Grayson v. Mayview State Hosp.*, 293 F.3d 103, 114 (3d Cir. 2002).

A well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere labels and conclusions. *See Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662 (2009); *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544 (2007). A plaintiff must plead facts sufficient to show that a claim has substantive

plausibility. See *Johnson v. City of Shelby*, 574 U.S.10 (2014). A complaint may not be dismissed, however, for imperfect statements of the legal theory supporting the claim asserted. See *id.* at 10.

A court reviewing the sufficiency of a complaint must take three steps: (1) take note of the elements the plaintiff must plead to state a claim; (2) identify allegations that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth; and (3) when there are well-pleaded factual allegations, assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief. *Connelly v. Lane Const. Corp.*, 809 F.3d 780,787 (3d Cir. 2016). Elements are sufficiently alleged when the facts in the complaint “show” that the plaintiff is entitled to relief. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)). Deciding whether a claim is plausible will be a “context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.” *Id.*

DISCUSSION

Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1996, a prisoner must pursue all available avenues for relief through the prison’s grievance system before bringing a federal civil rights action. See 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(a); *Booth v. Churner*, 532 U.S. 731, 741 n.6 (2001) (“[A]n inmate must exhaust irrespective of the forms of relief sought and offered through administrative avenues.”). Section 1997(e) provides, “No action shall be brought with respect to prison conditions under section 1983 of the Revised Statutes of the United States, or any other Federal law, by a prisoner confined in any jail, prison, or other correctional facility until such administrative remedies as are available are exhausted.” 42 U.S.C. § 1997(e). The exhaustion requirement is mandatory. *Williams*

v. Beard, 482 F.3d 637, 639 (3d Cir. 2007); *Booth*, 532 U.S. at 742 (holding that the exhaustion requirement of the PLRA applies to grievance procedures “regardless of the relief offered through administrative procedures”). The limitations period for filing a § 1983 action is tolled during the period that a prisoner spends exhausting his administrative remedies. See *Jones v. Unknown D.O.C. Bus Driver & Transportation Crew*, 944 F.3d 478, 480 (3d Cir. 2019).

There is no futility exception to § 1997e’s exhaustion requirement. *Nyhuis v. Reno*, 204 F.3d 65, 75-76 (3d Cir. 2000).

An inmate must fully satisfy the administrative requirements of the inmate grievance process before proceeding into federal court. *Spruill v. Gillis*, 372 F.3d 218 (3d Cir. 2004); see also *Oriakhi v. United States*, 165 F. App’x 991, 993 (3d Cir. 2006) (providing that “there appears to be unanimous circuit court consensus that a prisoner may not fulfill the PLRA’s exhaustion requirement by exhausting administrative remedies after the filing of the complaint in federal court”). Courts have concluded that inmates who fail to fully, or timely, complete the prison grievance process are barred from subsequently litigating claims in federal court. See, e.g., *Booth v. Churner*, 206 F.3d 289 (3d Cir. 2000); *Bolla v. Strickland*, 304 F. App’x 22 (3d Cir. 2008).

While exhaustion is an affirmative defense, the Court may *sua sponte* dismiss an action pursuant to § 1915A when the failure to exhaust defense is obvious from the face of the complaint. See *Caiby v. Haidle*, 785 F. App’x 64, 65 (3d Cir. 2019).

Given Plaintiff’s admission in the Complaint that the grievance process was not completed, it is evident that he did not exhaust his administrative remedies prior to

initiating this action. Accordingly, dismissal for failure to exhaust is warranted and the Complaint will be dismissed pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b)(1).

CONCLUSION

For the above reasons, the Court will dismiss the Complaint without prejudice pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B) and § 1915A(b)(1) for failure to exhaust administrative remedies.

An appropriate Order will be entered.