

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
FORT SMITH DIVISION

SHEILA L. BARNES

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 13-2147

CAROLYN W. COLVIN, Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Sheila L. Barnes, brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), seeking judicial review of a decision of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (Commissioner) denying her claim for supplemental security income (SSI) benefits under the provisions of Title XVI of the Social Security Act (Act). In this judicial review, the Court must determine whether there is substantial evidence in the administrative record to support the Commissioner's decision. See 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

I. Procedural Background:

Plaintiff protectively filed her current application for SSI on April 7, 2011, alleging an inability to work due to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and high blood pressure. (Tr. 118, 144). An administrative hearing was held on January 25, 2012, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 24-58).

By written decision dated June 7, 2012, the ALJ found that Plaintiff became disabled on February 17, 2012, and remained disabled through the date of the decision. (Tr. 12). The ALJ found that since the alleged onset date of December 31, 2010, Plaintiff had an impairment or

combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr. 14). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and hypertension. However, after reviewing all of the evidence presented, he determined that prior to February 17, 2012, Plaintiff's impairments did not meet or equal the level of severity of any impairment listed in the Listing of Impairments found in Appendix I, Subpart P, Regulation No. 4. (Tr. 15). The ALJ found that, prior to February 17, 2012, Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform sedentary work as defined in 20 CFR 416.967(a) reduced by the need to avoid even moderate exposure to temperature extremes, humidity, fumes/odors/dusts/gases/poor ventilation.

(Tr. 16). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform other work as a clerical worker, an assembler, and a vehicle escort driver, prior to February 17, 2012.

(Tr. 18). The ALJ determined that beginning on February 17, 2012, the severity of Plaintiff's COPD met Listing 3.02A. (Tr. 18).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on April 4, 2013. (Tr. 1-4). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 8). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 14, 17).

The Court has reviewed the entire transcript. The complete set of facts and arguments are presented in the parties' briefs, and are repeated here only to the extent necessary.

II. Applicable Law:

This Court's role is to determine whether the Commissioner's findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. Ramirez v. Barnhart, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir.

2002). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance but it is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's decision. The ALJ's decision must be affirmed if the record contains substantial evidence to support it. Edwards v. Barnhart, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003). As long as there is substantial evidence in the record that supports the Commissioner's decision, the Court may not reverse it simply because substantial evidence exists in the record that would have supported a contrary outcome, or because the Court would have decided the case differently. Haley v. Massanari, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). In other words, if after reviewing the record it is possible to draw two inconsistent positions from the evidence and one of those positions represents the findings of the ALJ, the decision of the ALJ must be affirmed. Young v. Apfel, 221 F.3d 1065, 1068 (8th Cir. 2000).

It is well-established that a claimant for Social Security disability benefits has the burden of proving her disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that has lasted at least one year and that prevents her from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. Pearsall v. Massanari, 274 F.3d 1211, 1217 (8th Cir.2001); see also 42 U.S.C. § § 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A). The Act defines “physical or mental impairment” as “an impairment that results from anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities which are demonstrable by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques.” 42 U.S.C. § § 423(d)(3), 1382(3)(c). A Plaintiff must show that her disability, not simply her impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months.

The Commissioner’s regulations require her to apply a five-step sequential evaluation process to each claim for disability benefits: (1) whether the claimant has engaged in substantial gainful activity since filing her claim; (2) whether the claimant has a severe physical and/or

mental impairment or combination of impairments; (3) whether the impairment(s) meet or equal an impairment in the listings; (4) whether the impairment(s) prevent the claimant from doing past relevant work; and, (5) whether the claimant is able to perform other work in the national economy given her age, education, and experience. See 20 C.F.R. § 416.920. Only if the final stage is reached does the fact finder consider the Plaintiff's age, education, and work experience in light of her residual functional capacity. See McCoy v. Schweiker, 683 F.2d 1138, 1141-42 (8th Cir. 1982); 20 C.F.R. § 416.920.

III. Discussion:

Plaintiff argues the following issues on appeal: 1) the ALJ failed to fully and completely develop the record; 2) the ALJ's credibility analysis was improper; 3) the ALJ's RFC determination was inconsistent with the evidence; and 4) Plaintiff cannot perform the jobs identified at Step Five.

A. Fully and Fairly Develop the Record:

An ALJ is required to develop the record fully and fairly. See Freeman v. Apfel, 208 F.3d 687, 692 (8th Cir. 2000) (ALJ must order consultative examination only when it is necessary for an informed decision). After reviewing the administrative record, it is clear that the record before the ALJ contained the evidence required to make a full and informed decision regarding Plaintiff's capabilities during the relevant time period. See Strongson v. Barnhart, 361 F.3d 1066, 1071-72 (8th Cir.2004) (ALJ must develop record fully and fairly to ensure it includes evidence from treating physician, or at least examining physician, addressing impairments at issue).

B. Subjective Complaints and Credibility Analysis:

We now address the ALJ's assessment of Plaintiff's subjective complaints. The ALJ was required to consider all the evidence relating to Plaintiff's subjective complaints including evidence presented by third parties that relates to: (1) Plaintiff's daily activities; (2) the duration, frequency, and intensity of her pain; (3) precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of her medication; and (5) functional restrictions. See Polaski v. Heckler, 739 F.2d 1320, 1322 (8th Cir. 1984). While an ALJ may not discount a claimant's subjective complaints solely because the medical evidence fails to support them, an ALJ may discount those complaints where inconsistencies appear in the record as a whole. Id. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit observed, "Our touchstone is that [a claimant's] credibility is primarily a matter for the ALJ to decide." Edwards v. Barnhart, 314 F.3d 964, 966 (8th Cir. 2003).

After reviewing the administrative record, it is clear that the ALJ properly considered and evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints, including the Polaski factors. A review of the record revealed that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff indicated that she was able to occasionally take care of her grandsons; to take care of her personal needs; to prepare simple meals; to clean and do laundry at a slow pace and to mow the lawn with a riding lawnmower; to shop in stores for food at a slow pace; to pay bills and count change; and to read, watch television, play hand-held games and cards, and go fishing a few times a month weather permitting. (Tr. 164-171, 182-189).

The medical evidence revealed that Plaintiff has COPD. When discussing Plaintiff's respiratory impairment, the ALJ pointed out that despite the repeated recommendations to stop

smoking, Plaintiff continued to smoke throughout the relevant time period. See Kisling v. Chater, 105 F.3d 1255, 1257 (8th Cir.1997) (noting that a failure to follow prescribed treatment may be grounds for denying an application for benefits); Mouser v. Astrue, 545 F.3d 634, 638 (8th Cir. 2008)(where claimant’s smoking had a direct impact on his impairments, the ALJ appropriately considered claimant’s failure to stop smoking in making his credibility determination).

With regard to Plaintiff’s hypertension, the record revealed that when Plaintiff took her medication as prescribed her blood pressure was much more controlled. Brace v. Astrue, 578 F.3d 882, 885 (8th Cir. 2009) (“If an impairment can be controlled by treatment or medication, it cannot be considered disabling.”)(citations omitted).

With regard to Plaintiff’s alleged depression, it is noteworthy that Plaintiff did not allege a disabling mental impairment in her application for benefits. See Dunahoo v. Apfel, 241 F.3d 1033, 1039 (8th Cir. 2001) (failure to allege disabling mental impairment in application is significant, even if evidence of depression is later developed). The record also failed to demonstrate that Plaintiff sought ongoing and consistent treatment for mental impairments during the relevant time period. See Gowell v. Apfel, 242 F.3d 793, 796 (8th Cir. 2001) (holding that lack of evidence of ongoing counseling or psychiatric treatment for depression weighs against plaintiff’s claim of disability).

The Court would also note that while Plaintiff alleged an inability to seek treatment due to a lack of finances, the record is void of any indication that Plaintiff had been denied treatment due to the lack of funds. Murphy v. Sullivan, 953 F.3d 383, 386-87 (8th Cir. 1992) (holding that lack of evidence that plaintiff sought low-cost medical treatment from her doctor, clinics, or

hospitals does not support plaintiff's contention of financial hardship). The record also revealed that Plaintiff was able to come up with the funds to support her smoking habit during the relevant time period. Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds there is substantial evidence to support the ALJ's credibility findings.

C. The ALJ's RFC Determination:

RFC is the most a person can do despite that person's limitations. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(1). It is assessed using all relevant evidence in the record. *Id.* This includes medical records, observations of treating physicians and others, and the claimant's own descriptions of her limitations. *Guilliams v. Barnhart*, 393 F.3d 798, 801 (8th Cir. 2005); *Eichelberger v. Barnhart*, 390 F.3d 584, 591 (8th Cir. 2004). Limitations resulting from symptoms such as pain are also factored into the assessment. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1545(a)(3). The United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit has held that a "claimant's residual functional capacity is a medical question." *Lauer v. Apfel*, 245 F.3d 700, 704 (8th Cir. 2001). Therefore, an ALJ's determination concerning a claimant's RFC must be supported by medical evidence that addresses the claimant's ability to function in the workplace. *Lewis v. Barnhart*, 353 F.3d 642, 646 (8th Cir. 2003). "[T]he ALJ is [also] required to set forth specifically a claimant's limitations and to determine how those limitations affect his RFC." *Id.*

In determining that Plaintiff maintained the RFC to perform sedentary work with limitations during the relevant time period, the ALJ considered the medical assessments of the examining and non-examining agency medical consultants; Plaintiff's subjective complaints; and her medical records. The Court notes that the ALJ discussed the relevant medical records, and the medical opinions of examining and non-examining medical professionals, and set forth the

reasons for the weight given to the opinions. Renstrom v. Astrue, 680 F.3d 1057, 1065 (8th Cir. 2012) (“It is the ALJ’s function to resolve conflicts among the opinions of various treating and examining physicians”)(citations omitted). Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ’s RFC determination for the relevant time period.

D. Hypothetical Question to the Vocational Expert:

After thoroughly reviewing the hearing transcript along with the entire evidence of record, the Court finds that the hypothetical the ALJ posed to the vocational expert fully set forth the impairments which the ALJ accepted as true and which were supported by the record as a whole. Goff v. Barnhart, 421 F.3d 785, 794 (8th Cir. 2005). Accordingly, the Court finds that the vocational expert's opinion constitutes substantial evidence supporting the ALJ's conclusion that Plaintiff's impairments did not preclude her from performing work as a clerical worker, an assembler, and a vehicle escort driver, prior to February 17, 2012. Pickney v. Chater, 96 F.3d 294, 296 (8th Cir. 1996)(testimony from vocational expert based on properly phrased hypothetical question constitutes substantial evidence).

IV. Conclusion:

Accordingly, having carefully reviewed the record, the undersigned finds substantial evidence supporting the ALJ's decision denying the Plaintiff benefits, and thus the decision should be affirmed. The undersigned further finds that the Plaintiff’s Complaint should be dismissed with prejudice.

DATED this 14th day of May, 2014.

/s/ Erin L. Setser

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE