

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
HARRISON DIVISION

MIKE J. SANDOVAL

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 12-3068

CAROLYN W. COLVIN, Acting Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Mike J. Sandoval, 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 his claims for period of disability and disability insurance benefits (DIB) under the provisions of Title II 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 his current application for DIB on January 26, 2010, alleging an inability to work since January 1, 2008, due to a right hip replacement and depression. (Tr. 111, 136). An administrative hearing was held on February 17, 2011, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 21-63).

By written decision dated May 2, 2011, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr. 11). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: degenerative joint

disease of the right hip status post arthroplasty and degenerative joint disease of the left hip. However, after reviewing all of the evidence presented, the ALJ determined that 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. 13). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform sedentary work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1657(a) except that he is able to only occasionally climb ramps and stairs, balance, and stoop and can never climb ropes, ladders or scaffolding, kneel, crouch or crawl.

(Tr. 13). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform work as a production worker, an interviewer, and a charge account clerk. (Tr. 16).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on May 18, 2012. (Tr. 1-4). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 7). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 11, 12).

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 his disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that has lasted at least one year and that prevents him 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 his disability, not simply his 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 his 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 his age, education, and experience. See 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520. Only if the final

stage is reached does the fact finder consider the Plaintiff's age, education, and work experience in light of his residual functional capacity. See McCoy v. Schweiker, 683 F.2d 1138, 1141-42 (8th Cir. 1982); 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520.

III. Discussion:

Plaintiff contends that the ALJ erred in concluding that the Plaintiff was not disabled because: 1) the ALJ erred in determining Plaintiff's RFC; 2) the ALJ erred in finding Plaintiff not credible; and 3) the ALJ erred in finding Plaintiff did not meet Listing 1.02.

A. 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 his 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.

The Court finds, based upon the well-stated reasons outlined in the Defendant's brief, that Plaintiff's argument is without merit, and there was sufficient evidence for the ALJ to make

an informed decision. The Court notes that in determining Plaintiff maintained the RFC to perform light work with limitations, the ALJ specifically discussed the relevant medical records, and the medical opinions of treating 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). In making the RFC determination, the ALJ also noted that on February 16, 2010, Plaintiff reported to Dr. Richard Evans, a treating physician, that he had no “pain whatsoever,” and asked about returning to carpentry work. (Tr. 278). At that time, Dr. Evans noted Plaintiff ambulated without an antalgic gait. Dr. Evans opined that Plaintiff could return to full carpentry work, but recommended that Plaintiff return to a less physical form of construction. Dr. Evans noted that Plaintiff had no complaints and discharged Plaintiff from his care. Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ’s RFC determination for the relevant time period.

B. Subjective Complaints and Credibility Analysis:

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 his pain; (3) precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of his 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, and the Defendant’s well-stated reasons set forth in her brief, it is clear that the ALJ properly considered and evaluated Plaintiff’s subjective complaints, including the Polaski factors. A review of the evidence revealed that Plaintiff completed a Function Report in March of 2010, wherein he reported he was able to take care of his personal needs, to take care of his cat, to prepare simple meals, to do household chores, to mow slowly, to drive a car, to shop, to pay bills, to watch television, and to spend time with his girlfriend going on short walks and watching television. (Tr. 157-164).

With regard to Plaintiff’s alleged disabling depression, the record failed to demonstrate that Plaintiff sought on-going and consistent treatment from a mental health professional 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 medical evidence further revealed that in November of 2009, Plaintiff denied the presence of a cognitive loss or a memory impairment, and in December of 2009, Plaintiff denied feeling down, hopeless or depressed. (Tr. 367, 285). Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence of record to support the ALJ’s determination that Plaintiff’s alleged depression was not severe.

Accordingly, the Court concludes that substantial evidence supports the ALJ’s conclusion that Plaintiff’s subjective complaints were not totally credible.

C. Listings of Impairments:

The burden of proof is on the Plaintiff to establish that his impairment meets or equals a listing. See Sullivan v. Zebley, 493 U.S. 521, 530-31, 110 S.Ct. 885, 107 L.Ed.2d 967 (1990). To meet a listing, an impairment must meet all of the listing's specified criteria. Id. at 530, 110 S.Ct. 885 (“An impairment that manifests only some of these criteria, no matter how severely, does not qualify.”); Johnson v. Barnhart, 390 F.3d 1067, 1070 (8th Cir. 2004). “Medical equivalence must be based on medical findings.” 20 C.F.R. § 416.926(b) (2003); Sullivan, 493 U.S. at 531 (“a claimant ... must present medical findings equal in severity to *all* the criteria for the one most similar listed impairment”).

The Court finds, based upon the record as a whole, that Plaintiff’s argument is without merit, and there was sufficient evidence for the ALJ to make an informed decision. Therefore, the Court finds there is sufficient evidence to support the ALJ’s determination that Plaintiff did not meet Listing 1.02.

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 him from performing work as a production worker, an interviewer, and a charge account clerk. 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 4th day of September, 2013.

/s/ Erin L. Setser

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE