

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

ELAINE R. ROYER

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 16-3023

NANCY A. BERRYHILL,¹ Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Elaine R. Royer, 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 claims for a period of disability and disability insurance benefits (DIB) and supplemental security income (SSI) benefits under the provisions of Titles II and 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 applications for DIB and SSI on October 9, 2012, and October 22, 2012, respectively, alleging an inability to work since August 23, 2012, due to a head trauma, fractures in the legs and arms, a hand fracture, and left eye blindness.² (Doc.

¹ Nancy A. Berryhill, has been appointed to serve as acting Commissioner of Social Security, and is substituted as Defendant, pursuant to Rule 25(d)(1) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure.

² The Court notes the ALJ found Plaintiff's alleged onset date to be August 28, 2012. (Doc. 9, p. 32).

9, pp. 112, 240, 248, 290). An administrative hearing was held on May 19, 2014, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Doc. 9, pp. 51-109).

By written decision dated October 20, 2014, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Doc. 9, p. 34). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: fractures of the left arm and left foot, a visual defect, a head injury, and an affective disorder. 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. (Doc. 9, p. 35). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform light work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1567(b) and 416.967(b) except she can only occasionally finger with her non-dominant left hand and perform only occasional overhead work with her non-dominant left upper extremity. In addition, she can occasionally climb, balance, stoop, kneel, crouch, and crawl. She is further limited and can perform only simple, routine and repetitive tasks in a setting where interpersonal contact is incidental to the work performed. She can respond to supervision that is simple, direct and concrete.

(Doc. 9, p. 37). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform work as power screwdriver operator, a warehouse clerk, and a blending tank tender. (Doc. 9, p. 43).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which after reviewing additional evidence submitted by Plaintiff denied that request on January 12, 2016. (Doc. 9, pp. 5-11). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 5). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 12, 13).

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).

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. §§ 404.1520, 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), abrogated on other grounds by Higgins v. Apfel, 222 F.3d 504, 505 (8th Cir. 2000); 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920.

III. Discussion:

Plaintiff argues the ALJ erred in determining Plaintiff's RFC. Defendant argues that substantial evidence supports the ALJ's decision.

A. Subjective Complaints and Symptom Evaluation:

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 Eighth Circuit has observed, “Our touchstone is that [a claimant’s] credibility is primarily a matter for the ALJ to decide.” Edwards, 314 F.3d at 966.

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 reveals that during the time period in question Plaintiff was able to take care of her personal needs, do light housekeeping, drive for short distances during the day, shop for groceries, prepare simple meals, and spend time with her family. The record revealed that in September of 2014, Plaintiff sought treatment for abscessed insect bites that she first noticed when she was camping.

With respect to Plaintiff’s physical limitations, the record reveals that Plaintiff underwent the surgical repair of her left arm and foot after falling off a bluff in August of 2012. The medical evidence indicated that Plaintiff underwent a second surgical repair in her left upper extremity in October of 2012. After continuing to experience left wrist pain in November and December of 2012, Plaintiff’s surgeon Dr. Troy H. Caron, limited Plaintiff from doing “any lifting with her left arm yet.” (Doc. 9, p. 554). At that time, Plaintiff was instructed to return in four weeks for a re-evaluation. The record failed to show that Plaintiff returned to see Dr. Caron. On May 14, 2013, Plaintiff underwent a consultative general physical examination. (Doc. 9, p. 532). Plaintiff was found to have normal range of motion of the upper and lower extremities with the exception of a ten percent decrease in her dorsiflexion of the right ankle. Plaintiff exhibited a normal gait. During this evaluation, Plaintiff was also able to pick up a coin bilaterally, to oppose thumb to fingers and to touch her fingertips to her palm.

Plaintiff's grip was noted as being 100% on the right and 80% on the left. The examiner opined that Plaintiff would have mild to moderate limitation with lifting and fingering with her left hand. Plaintiff complained of pain after moving boxes in October of 2013, but the record is void of any subsequent medical treatment, with the exception of treatment for abscessed insect bites while camping, during the relevant time period.

Regarding Plaintiff's mental functioning, the record showed Plaintiff sought very little treatment for these alleged impairments. 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). Based on the record as a whole, the Court finds substantial evidence to support the ALJ's determination that Plaintiff does not have a disabling mental impairment.

The Court would 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). It is noteworthy, that Plaintiff was able to come up with the funds to purchase cigarettes throughout the relevant time period.

With regard to the testimony of Plaintiff's adult children and a letter from a friend, the ALJ properly considered this evidence but found it unpersuasive. This determination was within the ALJ's province. See Siemers v. Shalala, 47 F.3d 299, 302 (8th Cir. 1995); Ownbey v. Shalala, 5 F.3d 342, 345 (8th Cir. 1993).

Therefore, although it is clear that Plaintiff suffers with some degree of limitation, she has not established that she is unable to engage in any gainful activity. Accordingly, the Court concludes that substantial evidence supports the ALJ's conclusion that Plaintiff's subjective complaints were not totally credible.

B. 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 h[er] RFC." Id.

In determining that Plaintiff maintained the RFC to perform light work with limitations, the ALJ considered the medical assessments of the examining and non-examining agency medical consultants; Plaintiff's subjective complaints; and her medical records. The ALJ also discussed the medical opinions of the examining and non-examining medical professionals, including the opinion of Drs. Nancy A. Bunting and Jerry Cunningham, 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); Prosch v. Apfel, 201 F.3d 1010 at 1012 (the ALJ may reject the conclusions of any medical expert, whether hired by the claimant or the government, if they are inconsistent with the record as a whole). After reviewing the entire transcript, the Court finds substantial evidence supporting the ALJ’s RFC determination for the time period in question.

C. 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 power screwdriver operator, a warehouse clerk, and a blending tank tender. 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 30th day of May 2017.

/s/ Erin L. Wiedemann

HON. ERIN L. WIEDEMANN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE