

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

JACKSON E. BALLANCE

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 16-3070

NANCY A. BERRYHILL,¹ Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Jackson E. Balance, 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 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 his current application for SSI on December 10, 2012, alleging an inability to work due to diabetes, high blood pressure, seizures, high cholesterol and deteriorating back bones. (Tr. 51, 139). An administrative hearing was held on November 12, 2014, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 22-49).

By written decision dated February 18, 2015, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr.

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.

11). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: degenerative disc disease, diabetes mellitus, and a seizure 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. (Tr. 11). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform light work as defined in 20 CFR 416.967(b) except that he can occasionally perform postural activities such as bend (sic), stoop, squat, kneel, crouch, or crawl. He can do occasional overhead reaching but should avoid hazards such as unprotected heights and dangerous machinery. He is limited to simple, routine, and repetitive tasks, involving only simple, work-related decisions, with few, if any, workplace changes, and no more than incidental contact with co-workers, supervisors, and the general public.

(Tr. 12). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform work as a machine tender, and an assembler. (Tr. 15).

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 May 10, 2016. (Tr. 1-4). 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. 10, 11).

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. § 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 his 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. § 416.920.

III. Discussion:

When the Appeals Council has considered material new evidence and nonetheless declined review, the ALJ's decision becomes the final action of the Commissioner. The Court then has no jurisdiction to review the Appeals Council's action because it is a nonfinal agency action. See Browning v. Sullivan, 958 F.2d 817, 822 (8th Cir. 1992). At this point, the Court's task is only to decide whether the ALJ's decision is supported by substantial evidence in the record as a whole, including the new evidence made part of the record by the Appeals Council that was not before the ALJ. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit has noted, "this [is] a peculiar task for a reviewing court." Riley v. Shalala, 18 F.3d 619, 622 (8th Cir.1994). However, once it is clear that the Appeals Council considered the new evidence, the Court must factor in the evidence and determine whether the ALJ's decision is still supported by substantial evidence. This requires the Court to speculate on how the ALJ would have weighed the newly submitted evidence had it been available at the initial hearing. Flynn v. Chater, 107 F.3d 617, 621 (8th Cir.1997). Thus, the Court has endeavored to perform this function with respect to the newly submitted evidence.

The new evidence submitted to the Appeals Council consists of treatment notes from Boston Mountain Rural Health Center dated November 3, 2014, indicating Plaintiff sought

treatment for seizures and back pain. (Tr. 677). Plaintiff was referred to and saw Dr. Ira Chatman, of Interventional Pain Management Associates, in November of 2014 for neck and back pain. (Tr. 613). Dr. Chatman recommended Plaintiff undergo MRIs of the cervical and lumbar spine. Plaintiff underwent a MRI of his cervical spine on March 4, 2015, and was found to have severe central canal stenosis with disease at C5-C6 causing impingement on the cord with some edema in the cord; and edema involving the C5 and C6 vertebral bodies consistent with active inflammation and probable instability. (Tr. 632). Dr. Kyle McAlister recommended that Plaintiff see a spine surgeon as soon as possible. Plaintiff's lumbar spine also revealed multiple level disc disease with bulging discs, most pronounced at the L2-L3 level. (Tr. 630). Had the ALJ had this medical evidence before him when making the decision in this case, the outcome may very well have been different. Accordingly, the Court believes that remand is necessary to allow the ALJ to consider this new and material evidence. With this evidence, the ALJ should then re-evaluate Plaintiff's RFC and specifically list in a hypothetical to a vocational expert any limitations that are indicated in the RFC assessment and supported by the evidence.

The undersigned acknowledges that the ALJ's decision may be the same after proper analysis. Nonetheless, proper analysis must occur. Groeper v. Sullivan, 932 F.2d 1234, 1239 (8th Cir. 1991).

IV. Conclusion:

Accordingly, the Court concludes that the ALJ's decision is not supported by substantial evidence, and therefore, the denial of benefits to the Plaintiff should be reversed and this matter should be remanded to the Commissioner for further consideration pursuant to sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

DATED this 5th day of September 2017.

/s/ Erin L. Wiedemann

HON. ERIN L. WIEDEMANN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE