

7IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS
TEXARKANA DIVISION

ALFRED C. HOPSON

PLAINTIFF

vs.

Civil No. 4:17-cv-04047

NANCY A. BERRYHILL

DEFENDANT

Acting Commissioner, Social Security Administration

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Alfred C. Hopson (“Plaintiff”) brings this action pursuant to § 205(g) of Title II of the Social Security Act (“The Act”), 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) (2006), seeking judicial review of a final decision of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (“SSA”) denying his application for Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”) under Title XVI of the Act. The parties have consented to the jurisdiction of a magistrate judge to conduct any and all proceedings in this case, including conducting the trial, ordering the entry of a final judgment, and conducting all post-judgment proceedings. ECF No. 9.¹ Pursuant to this authority, the Court issues this memorandum opinion and orders the entry of a final judgment in this matter.

1. Background:

Plaintiff’s application for SSI was filed on April 8, 2014. (Tr. 10). Plaintiff alleged he was disabled due to due to gout, heart issues, a brain aneurysm, and schizophrenia. (Tr. 234). Plaintiff alleged an onset date of October 1, 2012. (Tr. 10). This application was denied initially and again upon reconsideration. (Tr. 119-162, 165-167). Thereafter, Plaintiff requested an administrative hearing on his application and this hearing request was granted. (Tr. 168).

¹ The docket numbers for this case are referenced by the designation “ECF. No. ___” The transcript pages for this case are referenced by the designation “Tr.”

Plaintiff's administrative hearing was held on April 20, 2016. (Tr. 39-77). Plaintiff was present and was represented by counsel, Michael Angel, at this hearing. *Id.* Plaintiff and Vocational Expert ("VE") Diana Kizer testified at this hearing. *Id.* At the time of this hearing, Plaintiff was fifty (50) years old and a tenth grade education. (Tr. 44).

On May 31, 2016, the ALJ entered an unfavorable decision denying Plaintiff's application for SSI. (Tr. 10-33). In this decision, the ALJ determined Plaintiff had not engaged in Substantial Gainful Activity ("SGA") since April 8, 2014. (Tr. 12, Finding 1). The ALJ also determined Plaintiff had the severe impairments of gout; essential hypertension; thoracic and lumbar spine degenerative disc disease; mild osteoarthritis of the left elbow; mild right hand osteoarthritis; and affective, personality, and substance addiction disorders. (Tr. 12, Finding 2). The ALJ then determined Plaintiff's impairments did not meet or medically equal the requirements of any of the Listing of Impairments in Appendix 1 to Subpart P of Regulations No. 4 ("Listings"). (Tr. 14, Finding 3).

In this decision, the ALJ evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints and determined his RFC. (Tr. 17-32). First, the ALJ indicated he evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints and found his claimed limitations were not entirely credible. *Id.* Second, the ALJ determined Plaintiff retained the following RFC:

to lift and carry 20 pounds occasionally, and 10 pounds frequently; to stand and walk about six hours total during an eight hour work day; and to sit for about six hours total during an eight hour work day. He can only occasionally grasp with his right dominant hand. He can only occasionally reach, including overhead, with his left arm. He must be allowed to alternately sit and stand every 10 to 15 minutes throughout the work day for the purposes of changing positions, but without leaving the workstation. He is also limited to unskilled work (where the tasks are no more complex than those learned and performed by rote, with few variables and little judgment) where supervision must be simple, direct, concrete, and non-critical; and interpersonal contact with supervisors and coworkers is incidental to the work performed, e.g., assembly work, but he must not be required to work at fast-paced production lines speeds. He can work at a consistent pace if he has normal, regular

work breaks. He should have only occasional workplace changes. He should not be required to travel to unfamiliar places or to use public transportation as part of his work duties. In other words, he can perform less than the full range of “light” work.

(Tr. 17, Finding 4).

The ALJ evaluated Plaintiff’s Past Relevant Work (“PRW”). (Tr. 32, Finding 5). The ALJ found Plaintiff was not capable of performing his PRW. *Id.* The ALJ, however, also determined there was other work existing in significant numbers in the national economy Plaintiff could perform. (Tr. 32-33, Finding 9). The ALJ based this determination upon the testimony of the VE. *Id.* Specifically, the VE testified that given all Plaintiff’s vocational factors, a hypothetical individual would be able to perform the requirements of representative occupations such as conveyor line bakery worker with approximately 35,000 such jobs in the nation. *Id.* Based upon this finding, the ALJ determined Plaintiff had not been under a disability as defined by the Act since April 8, 2014. (Tr. 33, Finding 10).

Thereafter, Plaintiff requested the Appeals Council review the ALJ’s decision. (Tr. 212-214). *See* 20 C.F.R. § 404.968. The Appeals Council declined to review this unfavorable decision. (Tr. 1-6). On June 27, 2017, Plaintiff filed the present appeal. ECF No. 1. The Parties consented to the jurisdiction of this Court. ECF No. 9. Both Parties have filed appeal briefs. ECF Nos. 21, 22. This case is now ready for decision.

2. Applicable Law:

In reviewing this case, this Court is required to determine whether the Commissioner’s findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) (2006); *Ramirez v. Barnhart*, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir. 2002). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance of the evidence, but it is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner’s decision. *See Johnson v. Apfel*, 240 F.3d 1145, 1147 (8th Cir. 2001).

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. *See Haley v. Massanari*, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). 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. *See 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 or her disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that lasted at least one year and that prevents him or her from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. *See Cox v. Apfel*, 160 F.3d 1203, 1206 (8th Cir. 1998); 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A). The Act defines a "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 or her disability, not simply his or her impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A).

To determine whether the adult claimant suffers from a disability, the Commissioner uses the familiar five-step sequential evaluation. He determines: (1) whether the claimant is presently engaged in a "substantial gainful activity"; (2) whether the claimant has a severe impairment that significantly limits the claimant's physical or mental ability to perform basic work activities; (3) whether the claimant has an impairment that meets or equals a presumptively disabling impairment listed in the regulations (if so, the claimant is disabled without regard to age, education, and work experience); (4) whether the claimant has the Residual Functional Capacity (RFC) to perform his

or her past relevant work; and (5) if the claimant cannot perform the past work, the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove that there are other jobs in the national economy that the claimant can perform. *See Cox*, 160 F.3d at 1206; 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)-(f). The fact finder only considers the plaintiff's age, education, and work experience in light of his or her RFC if the final stage of this analysis is reached. *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920 (2003).

3. Discussion:

Plaintiff brings the present appeal claiming the ALJ erred: (A) by failing to fully develop the record and (B) in his credibility analysis. ECF No. 21, Pgs. 6-12. In response, the Defendant argues the ALJ did not err in any of his findings. ECF No. 22.

A. Duty to Develop Record

The ALJ has the duty to fully and fairly develop the record, even where the Plaintiff is represented by counsel. If a physician's report of a claimant's limitations are stated only generally, the ALJ should ask the physician to clarify and explain the stated limitations. *See Vaughn v. Heckler*, 741 F. 2d 177,179 (8th Cir. 1984). Furthermore, the ALJ is required to order medical examinations and tests if the medical records presented do not provide sufficient medical evidence to determine the nature and extent of a claimant's limitations and impairments. *See Barrett v. Shalala*, 38 F. 3d 1019, 1023 (8th Cir. 1994). The ALJ must develop the record until the evidence is sufficiently clear to make a fair determination as to whether the claimant is disabled. *See Landess v. Weinberger*, 490 F. 2d 1187, 1189 (8th Cir. 1974). In addition, a claimant must show not only that the ALJ failed to fully and fairly develop the record, but he must also show that he was prejudiced or treated unfairly by the ALJ's failure. *See Onstad v. Shalala*, 999 F.2d 1232, 1234 (8th Cir. 1993).

Plaintiff argues the ALJ erred by failing to fully develop the record regarding Plaintiff's alleged impairments of thoracic and lumbar spine degenerative disc disease, mild osteoarthritis of

the left elbow, and mild right hand osteoarthritis. ECF No. 21, Pgs. 8-10. Defendant argues substantial evidence shows the ALJ met his duty to fairly develop the record.

Initially the Court notes Plaintiff has failed to establish that the medical records presented did not provide sufficient medical evidence to determine the nature and extent of his limitations and impairments. *See Barrett v. Shalala*, 38 F. 3d 1019, 1023 (8th Cir. 1994). An ALJ is not required to order a consultative evaluation of every alleged impairment; he simply has the authority to do so if the existing medical sources do not contain sufficient evidence to make an informed decision. *See Matthews v. Bowen*, 879 F.2d 422, 424 (8th Cir. 1989).

Further, Plaintiff must not only show the ALJ failed to fully and fairly develop the record, but that he was prejudiced or treated unfairly by the ALJ's alleged failure to develop the record. Plaintiff has not set forth any evidence showing had the ALJ requested additional consultative examinations, the ALJ would have arrived at a different decision.

Therefore, I find the ALJ satisfied his duty to fully and fairly develop the record in this matter.

B. ALJ's Credibility Determination

Plaintiff claims the ALJ erred in his credibility determination. ECF No. 21, Pgs. 10-12. In response, Defendant argues the ALJ properly evaluated and discredited Plaintiff's subjective complaints pursuant to the directives of *Polaski*. ECF No. 22.

In assessing the credibility of a claimant, the ALJ is required to examine and to apply the five factors from *Polaski v. Heckler*, 739 F.2d 1320 (8th Cir. 1984) or from 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529 and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929.² *See Shultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979, 983 (2007). The factors to consider

² Social Security Regulations 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529 and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929 require the analysis of two additional factors: (1) "treatment, other than medication, you receive or have received for relief of your pain or other symptoms" and (2) "any measures you use or have used to relieve your pain or symptoms (e.g., lying flat on your back, standing for 15 to 20 minutes every hour, sleeping on a board, etc.)." However, under *Polaski* and its progeny, the Eighth Circuit has not yet required the analysis of these additional factors. *See Shultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979,

are as follows: (1) the claimant's daily activities; (2) the duration, frequency, and intensity of the pain; (3) the precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) the dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of medication; and (5) the functional restrictions. *See Polaski*, 739 at 1322.

The factors must be analyzed and considered in light of the claimant's subjective complaints of pain. *See id.* The ALJ is not required to methodically discuss each factor as long as the ALJ acknowledges and examines these factors prior to discounting the claimant's subjective complaints. *See Lowe v. Apfel*, 226 F.3d 969, 971-72 (8th Cir. 2000). As long as the ALJ properly applies these five factors and gives several valid reasons for finding the Plaintiff's subjective complaints are not entirely credible, the ALJ's credibility determination is entitled to deference. *See id.*; *Cox v. Barnhart*, 471 F.3d 902, 907 (8th Cir. 2006). The ALJ, however, cannot discount Plaintiff's subjective complaints "solely because the objective medical evidence does not fully support them [the subjective complaints]." *Polaski*, 739 F.2d at 1322.

When discounting a claimant's complaint of pain, the ALJ must make a specific credibility determination, articulating the reasons for discrediting the testimony, addressing any inconsistencies, and discussing the *Polaski* factors. *See Baker v. Apfel*, 159 F.3d 1140, 1144 (8th Cir. 1998). The inability to work without some pain or discomfort is not a sufficient reason to find a Plaintiff disabled within the strict definition of the Act. The issue is not the existence of pain, but whether the pain a Plaintiff experiences precludes the performance of substantial gainful activity. *See Thomas v. Sullivan*, 928 F.2d 255, 259 (8th Cir. 1991).

Plaintiff argues the ALJ erred in assessing his credibility as it related to the limiting effects of his impairments and did not fully consider his subjective complaints. The Defendant argues the ALJ properly evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints of pain in compliance with *Polaski*.

In the present action, this Court finds the ALJ properly addressed and discounted Plaintiff's

983 (2007). Thus, this Court will not require the analysis of these additional factors in this case.

subjective complaints. In his opinion, the ALJ addressed the factors from *Polaski*, 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529, and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929, and stated inconsistencies between Plaintiff's testimony and the record. (Tr. 18-32). Specifically, the ALJ noted the following: (1) Absence of objective medical findings to support Plaintiff's alleged disabling pain, (2) Inconsistent statements of Plaintiff regarding daily activities and functional capabilities, (3) Evidence Plaintiff was a malingerer, (4) Plaintiff's described activities of daily living allow for active lifestyle, (5) Conservative medical treatment, (6) Evidence Plaintiff was motivated by benefits in seeking medical treatment, and (7) No indication of medication side effects that could not be resolved through change in medication or dosage. *Id.*

These findings are valid reasons supporting the ALJ's credibility determination, and this Court finds the ALJ's credibility determination is supported by substantial evidence and should be affirmed. *See Lowe*, 226 F.3d at 971-72. Accordingly, the ALJ did not err in discounting Plaintiff complaints of pain

4. Conclusion:

Based on the foregoing, the undersigned finds that the decision of the ALJ, denying benefits to Plaintiff, is supported by substantial evidence and should be affirmed. A judgment incorporating these findings will be entered pursuant to Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 52 and 58.

ENTERED this 7th day of May 2018.

/s/ Barry A. Bryant
HON. BARRY A. BRYANT
U. S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE