

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

CONNIE WHITAKER

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 12-5242

CAROLYN W. COLVIN,¹ Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Connie J. Whitaker, 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 a 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 her current application for DIB on September 17, 2009, alleging an inability to work since December 2, 2008,² due to fibromyalgia, memory loss, depression, concentration problems, muscle pain, and bladder control problems. (Tr. 107, 124).

¹Carolyn W. Colvin, 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.

²Plaintiff, through her counsel, amended her alleged onset date to December 31, 2009. (Tr. 17, 33).

An administrative hearing was held on April 21, 2011, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Tr. 30-51).

By written decision dated June 23, 2011, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Tr. 19). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: fibromyalgia, a history of knee surgery, cardiomegaly, obesity, a depressive disorder, and a generalized anxiety disorder. (Tr. 19). 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. 19). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform sedentary work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1567(a). This includes occasionally lift/carry 10 pounds, frequently lift carry to 10 pounds, stand for at least 2 hours and sit about 6 hours in an 8-hour workday, all work normal breaks. She can perform simple, repetitive tasks, with no more than incidental contact with the public, and cannot work as part of a team.

(Tr. 21). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform work as a production worker.

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 September 15, 2012. (Tr. 1-6). 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. 9, 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 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. § 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 her residual functional capacity. See McCoy v. Schweiker, 683 F.2d 1138, 1141-42 (8th Cir. 1982); 20 C.F.R. § 404.1520.

III. Discussion:

Of particular concern to the undersigned is 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). A disability claimant has the burden of establishing his or her RFC. See Masterson v. Barnhart, 363 F.3d 731, 737 (8th Cir.2004). "The ALJ determines a claimant's RFC based on all relevant evidence in the record, including medical records, observations of treating physicians and others, and the claimant's own descriptions of his or her limitations." Eichelberger v. Barnhart, 390 F.3d 584, 591 (8th Cir. 2004); Guilliams v. Barnhart, 393 F.3d 798, 801 (8th Cir. 2005). 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).

In the present case, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff was able to perform sedentary work with limitations. After reviewing the entire record, what is troubling to the undersigned is the medical evidence indicting Plaintiff's complaints of pain in her upper extremities and the diagnosis of carpal tunnel syndrome. The medical evidence revealed that on April 28, 2010, Plaintiff complained of pain in her arms and hands. (Tr. 412). On June 30, 2010, Plaintiff was noted to have positive Tinel's and Phalen's signs, as well as a weak grip. (Tr. 406). At that time, Plaintiff was instructed to wear her splints as much as possible and to rest her hands. The Court notes that most unskilled sedentary jobs require good use of the hands and fingers for repetitive hand-finger actions, and any significant manipulative limitation of an individual's ability to handle and work with small objects with both hands will result in a significant erosion of the unskilled sedentary occupational base. Social Security Ruling 96-9P, 1996 WL 374185 *8. Based on the foregoing, the Court believes remand is necessary for the ALJ to more fully and fairly develop the record regarding Plaintiff's alleged carpal tunnel syndrome.

On remand, the ALJ is directed to address interrogatories to the physicians who have evaluated and/or treated Plaintiff asking the physicians to review Plaintiff's medical records; to complete a RFC assessment regarding Plaintiff's capabilities during the time period in question; and to give the objective basis for their opinions so that an informed decision can be made regarding Plaintiff's ability to perform basic work activities on a sustained basis.

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 assessments and supported by the evidence.

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 25th day of March, 2014.

/s/ Erin L. Setser

HON. ERIN L. SETSER
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE