

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

LAURA A. HERRE

PLAINTIFF

v.

CIVIL NO. 16-5207

NANCY A. BERRYHILL,¹ Commissioner
Social Security Administration

DEFENDANT

MEMORANDUM OPINION

Plaintiff, Laura A. Herre, 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 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 her current application for SSI on August 30, 2012, alleging an inability to work due to a traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, fractures of the shoulder rotator cuff needing rehabilitation, migraines, double vision, a memory impairment and whiplash. (Doc. 10, pp. 71, 170). An administrative video hearing was held on August 7, 2014, at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified. (Doc. 10, pp. 35-69).

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.

By written decision dated January 16, 2015, the ALJ found that during the relevant time period, Plaintiff had an impairment or combination of impairments that were severe. (Doc. 10, p. 17). Specifically, the ALJ found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: an intracranial injury, a fracture of the upper limb and an anxiety disorder, NOS. 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. 10, p. 18). The ALJ found Plaintiff retained the residual functional capacity (RFC) to:

perform light work as defined in 20 CFR 416.967(b) except the claimant can occasionally reach overhead on a bilateral basis. She can frequently rotate, flex and extend her neck. She is able to perform work where interpersonal contact is incidental to the work performed; complexity of tasks is learned and performed by rote with few variables and little judgment; supervision required is simple, direct and concrete.

(Doc. 10, p. 19). With the help of a vocational expert, the ALJ determined Plaintiff could perform other work as a shipping weigher, a laminating machine off-bearer, and a blending tank tender. (Doc. 10, p. 28).

Plaintiff then requested a review of the hearing decision by the Appeals Council, which denied that request on June 9, 2016. (Doc. 10, p. 5). Subsequently, Plaintiff filed this action. (Doc. 1). This case is before the undersigned pursuant to the consent of the parties. (Doc. 6). Both parties have filed appeal briefs, and the case is now ready for decision. (Docs. 13, 15).

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. § 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. § 416.920.

III. Discussion:

Plaintiff argues the following issues on appeal: 1) the ALJ failed to consider all of Plaintiff's impairments in combination; 2) the ALJ erred in his credibility findings in regard to Plaintiff's subjective complaints of pain; and 3) the ALJ erred in finding Plaintiff retains the RFC to perform a limited range of light work.

A. Combination of Impairments:

Plaintiff argues that the ALJ erred in failing to consider all of the claimant's impairments in combination.

The ALJ stated that in determining Plaintiff's RFC he considered "all of the claimant's impairments, including impairments that are not severe." (Doc. 10, p. 16). The ALJ further found that Plaintiff did not have an impairment or combination of impairments that met or medically equaled one of the listed impairments. (Doc. 10, p. 17). Such language demonstrates the ALJ considered the combined effect of Plaintiff's impairments. Hajek v. Shalala, 30 F.3d 89, 92 (8th Cir. 1994).

B. 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. The ALJ noted that during the time period in question, Plaintiff was able to care for her own children, ages ten and fifteen years of age, as well as a three month old baby; to do light housekeeping; to prepare meals; to shop; and to drive. The record revealed Plaintiff had difficulties with performing activities of daily living after her accident. However, when Plaintiff was evaluated by Dr. Terry L. Efird in October of 2013, she reported that "most of the time" she could perform activities of daily living, perform basic self-care tasks independently, drive, do household chores, handle finances and shop, noting she would need help lifting heavy items. (Doc. 10, pp. 676-679).

With respect to Plaintiff's alleged physical impairments, the record revealed that Plaintiff was treated conservatively and appeared to experience some relief with the use of

medication. See Black v. Apfel, 143 F.3d 383, 386 (8th Cir.1998); See Robinson v. Sullivan, 956 F.2d 836, 840 (8th Cir. 1992) (course of conservative treatment contradicted claims of disabling pain). A review of the medical evidence revealed that Plaintiff complained of significant pain and post-concussive symptoms for a period of time after her July of 2012 accident. However, after moving to Arkansas in June of 2013, progress notes from Gibson Chiropractic revealed that Plaintiff reported improvement in her symptoms. (Doc. 10, p. 702). The medical evidence revealed that Plaintiff reported experiencing headaches during her first pre-natal visit November of 2013; however, during subsequent visits she denied experiencing headaches, joint pains or muscle pain. (Doc. 10, pp. 718, 720, 726, 731).

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).

With regard to a third-party statement completed by Plaintiff's husband, 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.

C. The ALJ's RFC Determination and Medical Opinions:

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 finding Plaintiff able to perform light work with limitations, the ALJ considered Plaintiff's subjective complaints, the medical records, and the evaluations of the examining and non-examining medical providers. The ALJ also specifically discussed the relevant medical records, and the medical opinions of treating, examining 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); 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.

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 her from performing work as a shipping weigher, a laminating machine off-bearer, 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 25th day of August 2017.

/s/ Erin L. Wiedemann

HON. ERIN L. WIEDEMANN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE