

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
FOR THE DISTRICT OF MARYLAND  
Southern Division**

**SARAH CUSTER,**

**Plaintiff,**

**v.**

**NANCY A. BERRYHILL,  
Acting Commissioner of Social Security,**

**Defendant.<sup>1</sup>**

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**Civil No. TMD 17-1184**

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**MEMORANDUM OPINION GRANTING DEFENDANT’S  
MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT**

Plaintiff Sarah Custer seeks judicial review under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) of a final decision of the Commissioner of Social Security (“Defendant” or the “Commissioner”) denying her application for Supplemental Security Income under Title XVI of the Social Security Act. Before the Court are Plaintiff’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 13) and Defendant’s Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 20).<sup>2</sup> Plaintiff contends that the administrative record does not contain substantial evidence to support the Commissioner’s decision that she is not disabled. No hearing is necessary. L.R. 105.6. For the reasons that follow, Defendant’s Motion

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<sup>1</sup> On April 17, 2018, Nancy A. Berryhill became the Acting Commissioner of Social Security. See 5 U.S.C. § 3346(a)(2); *Patterson v. Berryhill*, No. 2:18-cv-00193-DWA, slip op. at 2 (W.D. Pa. June 14, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The Fourth Circuit has noted that, “in social security cases, we often use summary judgment as a procedural means to place the district court in position to fulfill its appellate function, not as a device to avoid nontriable issues under usual Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 56 standards.” *Walls v. Barnhart*, 296 F.3d 287, 289 n.2 (4th Cir. 2002). For example, “the denial of summary judgment accompanied by a remand to the Commissioner results in a judgment under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), which is immediately appealable.” *Id.*

for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 20) is **GRANTED**, Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 13) is **DENIED**, and the Commissioner's final decision is **AFFIRMED**.

## I

### Background

On March 30, 2016, Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ") O. Price Dodson found that Plaintiff was not disabled since the application date of December 31, 2013. R. at 6-23. In so finding, the ALJ found that Plaintiff's Crohn's disease was a severe impairment but found that

[t]he medical evidence of record does not support the extent of [Plaintiff's] allegations, especially [her] allegation that she has remained in bed for the past nine years except to eat and use the bathroom. The undersigned notes that there are no reports of muscle wasting or atrophy in the record to support this allegation. At the hearing, the undersigned observed that [Plaintiff] had no difficulty walking in and out of the hearing room. Of note is that the record reflects [Plaintiff] did not appear using an assistive ambulatory device at office visits. [Plaintiff's] progress notes reflect normal psychiatric clinical examination findings, even when [Plaintiff] reported pain during Crohn's flares.

R. at 11, 13.

The ALJ then determined that Plaintiff had the residual functional capacity ("RFC") "to perform sedentary work as defined in 20 CFR 416.967(a) except [Plaintiff] can only occasionally bend, stoop, or crouch." R. at 12. The ALJ found that, although she had no past relevant work, Plaintiff was capable of performing other work, such as an assembler, document preparer, or food and beverage order clerk. R. at 18.

On April 29, 2017, Plaintiff filed a complaint in this Court seeking review of the Commissioner's decision. Upon the parties' consent, this case was transferred to a United States Magistrate Judge for final disposition and entry of judgment. The case then was reassigned to the undersigned. The parties have briefed the issues, and the matter is now fully submitted.

## II

### **Disability Determinations and Burden of Proof**

The Social Security Act defines a disability as the inability to engage in any substantial gainful activity by reason of any medically determinable physical or mental impairment that can be expected to result in death or that has lasted or can be expected to last for a continuous period of not less than twelve months. 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A); 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1505, 416.905. A claimant has a disability when the claimant is “not only unable to do his previous work but cannot, considering his age, education, and work experience, engage in any other kind of substantial gainful work which exists . . . in significant numbers either in the region where such individual lives or in several regions of the country.” 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(2)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(B).

To determine whether a claimant has a disability within the meaning of the Social Security Act, the Commissioner follows a five-step sequential evaluation process outlined in the regulations. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920; *see Barnhart v. Thomas*, 540 U.S. 20, 24-25, 124 S. Ct. 376, 379-80 (2003). “If at any step a finding of disability or nondisability can be made, the [Commissioner] will not review the claim further.” *Thomas*, 540 U.S. at 24, 124 S. Ct. at 379; *see* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4). The claimant has the burden of production and proof at steps one through four. *See Bowen v. Yuckert*, 482 U.S. 137, 146 n.5, 107 S. Ct. 2287, 2294 n.5 (1987); *Radford v. Colvin*, 734 F.3d 288, 291 (4th Cir. 2013).

First, the Commissioner will consider a claimant’s work activity. If the claimant is engaged in substantial gainful activity, then the claimant is not disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(i), 416.920(a)(4)(i).

Second, if the claimant is not engaged in substantial gainful activity, the Commissioner looks to see whether the claimant has a “severe” impairment, i.e., an impairment or combination of impairments that significantly limits the claimant’s physical or mental ability to do basic work activities. *Pass v. Chater*, 65 F.3d 1200, 1203 (4th Cir. 1995); see 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(c), 404.1521(a), 416.920(c), 416.921(a).<sup>3</sup>

Third, if the claimant has a severe impairment, then the Commissioner will consider the medical severity of the impairment. If the impairment meets or equals one of the presumptively disabling impairments listed in the regulations, then the claimant is considered disabled, regardless of age, education, and work experience. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iii), 404.1520(d), 416.920(a)(4)(iii), 416.920(d); see *Radford*, 734 F.3d at 293.

Fourth, if the claimant’s impairment is severe, but it does not meet or equal one of the presumptively disabling impairments, then the Commissioner will assess the claimant’s RFC to determine the claimant’s “ability to meet the physical, mental, sensory, and other requirements” of the claimant’s past relevant work. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iv), 404.1545(a)(4), 416.920(a)(4)(iv), 416.945(a)(4). RFC is a measurement of the most a claimant can do despite his or her limitations. *Hines v. Barnhart*, 453 F.3d 559, 562 (4th Cir. 2006); see 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a)(1), 416.945(a)(1). The claimant is responsible for providing evidence the Commissioner will use to make a finding as to the claimant’s RFC, but the Commissioner is responsible for developing the claimant’s “complete medical history, including arranging for a

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<sup>3</sup> The ability to do basic work activities is defined as “the abilities and aptitudes necessary to do most jobs.” 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1521(b), 416.921(b). These abilities and aptitudes include (1) physical functions such as walking, standing, sitting, lifting, pushing, pulling, reaching, carrying, or handling; (2) capacities for seeing, hearing, and speaking; (3) understanding, carrying out, and remembering simple instructions; (4) use of judgment; (5) responding appropriately to supervision, co-workers, and usual work situations; and (6) dealing with changes in a routine work setting. *Id.* §§ 404.1521(b)(1)-(6), 416.921(b)(1)-(6); see *Yuckert*, 482 U.S. at 141, 107 S. Ct. at 2291.

consultative examination(s) if necessary, and making every reasonable effort to help [the claimant] get medical reports from [the claimant's] own medical sources.” 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1545(a)(3), 416.945(a)(3). The Commissioner also will consider certain non-medical evidence and other evidence listed in the regulations. *See id.* If a claimant retains the RFC to perform past relevant work, then the claimant is not disabled. *Id.* §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(iv), 416.920(a)(4)(iv).

Fifth, if the claimant's RFC as determined in step four will not allow the claimant to perform past relevant work, then the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove that there is other work that the claimant can do, given the claimant's RFC as determined at step four, age, education, and work experience. *See Hancock v. Astrue*, 667 F.3d 470, 472-73 (4th Cir. 2012). The Commissioner must prove not only that the claimant's RFC will allow the claimant to make an adjustment to other work, but also that the other work exists in significant numbers in the national economy. *See Walls*, 296 F.3d at 290; 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(v), 416.920(a)(4)(v). If the claimant can make an adjustment to other work that exists in significant numbers in the national economy, then the Commissioner will find that the claimant is not disabled. If the claimant cannot make an adjustment to other work, then the Commissioner will find that the claimant is disabled. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)(4)(v), 416.920(a)(4)(v).

### III

#### **Substantial Evidence Standard**

The Court reviews an ALJ's decision to determine whether the ALJ applied the correct legal standards and whether the factual findings are supported by substantial evidence. *See Craig v. Chater*, 76 F.3d 585, 589 (4th Cir. 1996). In other words, the issue before the Court "is not whether [Plaintiff] is disabled, but whether the ALJ's finding that [Plaintiff] is not disabled is supported by substantial evidence and was reached based upon a correct application of the relevant law." *Id.* The Court's review is deferential, as "[t]he findings of the Commissioner of Social Security as to any fact, if supported by substantial evidence, shall be conclusive." 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). Under this standard, substantial evidence is less than a preponderance but is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's conclusion. *See Hancock*, 667 F.3d at 472; *see also Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401, 91 S. Ct. 1420, 1427 (1971).

In evaluating the evidence in an appeal of a denial of benefits, the court does "not conduct a *de novo* review of the evidence," *Smith v. Schweiker*, 795 F.2d 343, 345 (4th Cir. 1986), or undertake to reweigh conflicting evidence, make credibility determinations, or substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner. *Hancock*, 667 F.3d at 472. Rather, "[t]he duty to resolve conflicts in the evidence rests with the ALJ, not with a reviewing court." *Smith v. Chater*, 99 F.3d 635, 638 (4th Cir. 1996). When conflicting evidence allows reasonable minds to differ as to whether a claimant is disabled, the responsibility for that decision falls on the ALJ. *Johnson v. Barnhart*, 434 F.3d 650, 653 (4th Cir. 2005) (*per curiam*).

## IV

### Discussion

Plaintiff contends that the ALJ erroneously assessed her RFC contrary to Social Security Ruling<sup>4</sup> (“SSR”) 96-8p, 1996 WL 374184 (July 2, 1996). Pl.’s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 3-9, ECF No. 13-1. Plaintiff maintains that the ALJ failed to perform properly a function-by-function assessment of her ability to perform the physical and mental demands of work. *Id.* at 6. In particular, she contends that the ALJ erred in failing to explain the ALJ’s RFC assessment. *Id.* at 6-8. Plaintiff further asserts that the ALJ failed to account for the side effects of her treatment. *Id.* at 8-9. She finally maintains that the ALJ erroneously assessed her subjective complaints. *Id.* at 9-12. For the reasons that follow, Plaintiff’s contentions are unavailing.

#### **A. ALJ’s RFC Assessment**

SSR 96-8p explains how adjudicators should assess RFC and instructs that the RFC

“assessment must first identify the individual’s functional limitations or restrictions and assess his or her work-related abilities on a function-by-function basis, including the functions” listed in the regulations. “Only after that may [residual functional capacity] be expressed in terms of the exertional levels of work, sedentary, light, medium, heavy, and very heavy.” The Ruling further explains that the residual functional capacity “assessment must include a narrative discussion describing how the evidence supports each conclusion, citing specific medical facts (e.g., laboratory findings) and nonmedical evidence (e.g., daily activities, observations).”

*Mascio v. Colvin*, 780 F.3d 632, 636 (4th Cir. 2015) (alteration in original) (footnote omitted) (citations omitted). The Fourth Circuit has held, however, that a per se rule requiring remand

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<sup>4</sup> Social Security Rulings are “final opinions and orders and statements of policy and interpretations” that the Social Security Administration has adopted. 20 C.F.R. § 402.35(b)(1). Once published, these rulings are binding on all components of the Social Security Administration. *Heckler v. Edwards*, 465 U.S. 870, 873 n.3, 104 S. Ct. 1532, 1534 n.3 (1984); 20 C.F.R. § 402.35(b)(1). “While they do not have the force of law, they are entitled to deference unless they are clearly erroneous or inconsistent with the law.” *Pass*, 65 F.3d at 1204 n.3.

when the ALJ does not perform an explicit function-by-function analysis “is inappropriate given that remand would prove futile in cases where the ALJ does not discuss functions that are ‘irrelevant or uncontested.’” *Id.* (quoting *Cichocki v. Astrue*, 729 F.3d 172, 177 (2d Cir. 2013) (per curiam)). Rather, remand may be appropriate “where an ALJ fails to assess a claimant’s capacity to perform relevant functions, despite contradictory evidence in the record, or where other inadequacies in the ALJ’s analysis frustrate meaningful review.” *Id.* (quoting *Cichocki*, 729 F.3d at 177). The court in *Mascio* concluded that remand was appropriate because it was “left to guess about how the ALJ arrived at his conclusions on [the claimant’s] ability to perform relevant functions” because the ALJ had “said nothing about [the claimant’s] ability to perform them for a full workday,” despite conflicting evidence as to the claimant’s RFC that the ALJ did not address. *Id.* at 637; *see Monroe v. Colvin*, 826 F.3d 176, 187-88 (4th Cir. 2016) (remanding because ALJ erred in not determining claimant’s RFC using function-by-function analysis; ALJ erroneously expressed claimant’s RFC first and then concluded that limitations caused by claimant’s impairments were consistent with that RFC).

Plaintiff first contends that, by failing to set forth a narrative discussion while assessing her RFC, the ALJ did not comply with SSR 96-8p. Pl.’s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 6-8, ECF No. 13-1. The ALJ found, however, that the RFC assessment was “supported by [Plaintiff’s] statements and testimony, the objective medical evidence, [Plaintiff’s] course of treatment, [Plaintiff’s] progress notes, [Plaintiff’s] clinical examination findings, the supporting opinion evidence, and the longitudinal record as a whole.” R. at 17. Contrary to Plaintiff’s assertion, in assessing her RFC, the ALJ considered the treatment records, opinion evidence, hearing testimony, and her credibility (R. at 12-17). *See Chandler v. Comm’r, Soc. Sec. Admin.*, Civil No. SAG-12-2712, 2014 WL 457746, at \*2 (D. Md. Jan. 31, 2014) (“[T]he ALJ provided



approximately a four-page written narrative on her RFC alone, in which he summarized [the claimant's] hearing testimony, made a credibility determination, reviewed both the treatment records and the opinion evidence, and noted observations from the hearing. [The claimant's] boilerplate argument is therefore inapplicable in this case.” (citation omitted)). Plaintiff's contention in this regard thus is unavailing.

Plaintiff next argues that the ALJ failed to account for the side effects of her infusion treatment. Pl.'s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 8-9, ECF No. 13-1. Although Plaintiff testified that, following her treatment, the medication tires her out for one to two days (R. at 34-35), she contends that the ALJ failed to address the treatment's side effects and their impact on her ability to perform work-related activities in the RFC assessment. However, “there is no rigid requirement that the ALJ specifically refer to every piece of evidence in his decision.” *Reid v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 769 F.3d 861, 865 (4th Cir. 2014) (quoting *Dyer v. Barnhart*, 395 F.3d 1206, 1211 (11th Cir. 2005) (per curiam)). “The Commissioner, through the ALJ and Appeals Council, stated that the whole record was considered, and, absent evidence to the contrary, we take her at her word.” *Id.* In any event, Plaintiff “has failed to point to *any* specific piece of evidence not considered by the Commissioner that might have changed the outcome of [her] disability claim.” *Id.* Plaintiff's contention in this regard also is unavailing.

#### **B. ALJ's Determination of Plaintiff's Credibility**

Plaintiff finally argues that the ALJ erroneously assessed her subjective complaints. Pl.'s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 9-12, ECF No. 13-1. According to Plaintiff, the ALJ applied an erroneous standard in evaluating her pain, requiring objective evidence to substantiate the intensity, persistence, and limiting effects of her Crohn's disease. *Id.* at 10-11. As the Commissioner points out, however, the ALJ also found that the medical evidence of record did

not support the extent of Plaintiff's allegations, especially her allegation that she had remained in bed for the past nine years. R. at 13. The ALJ noted that there were no reports of muscle wasting or atrophy in the record to support this allegation (R. at 13). *See Stiles v. Astrue*, 256 F. App'x 994, 997-98 (9th Cir. 2007). The ALJ also noted that Plaintiff had no difficulty walking in and out of the hearing room (R. at 13). *See Shively v. Heckler*, 739 F.2d 987, 989 (4th Cir. 1984) ("Because he had the opportunity to observe the demeanor and to determine the credibility of the claimant, the ALJ's observations concerning these questions are to be given great weight."). Plaintiff's argument in this regard thus is without merit, as well as her remaining arguments regarding her credibility (Pl.'s Mem. Supp. Mot. Summ. J. 11-12, ECF No. 13-1).

In sum, substantial evidence supports the decision of the ALJ, who applied the correct legal standards here. Thus, Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment is **GRANTED**, Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment is **DENIED**, and the Commissioner's final decision is **AFFIRMED**.

## V

### Conclusion

For the reasons stated above, Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 20) is **GRANTED**. Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment (ECF No. 13) is **DENIED**. The Commissioner's final decision is **AFFIRMED**. A separate order will issue.

Date: September 26, 2018

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/s/  
Thomas M. DiGirolamo  
United States Magistrate Judge