

Further evidence of deaths due to UK welfare benefits sanctions

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The number of deaths among some of the poorest people in the UK, due to the withdrawal of welfare benefits, is increasing.

Figures released following a Freedom of Information request by the *Disability News Service* revealed that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has investigated decisions, via peer reviews, about the welfare payments of 60 claimants following their deaths. A peer review, according to the DWP guidance for employees, must be undertaken when suicide is associated with DWP activity to ensure that any DWP action or involvement with the person was appropriate and procedurally correct.

This is the first time the DWP has tacitly admitted that there could be a link. Campaigners against welfare sanctions believe that the numbers who have died are a lot higher and that the changes to the benefits rules have amounted to “passive euthanasia.”

The DWP applies benefit sanctions when it deems that a claimant has not complied with the requirements of specific aspects of the person’s claim to a benefit. A sanction could be applied when a claimant does not attend just one appointment at the Job Centre or work programme provider. Sanctions can also be applied against a claimant deemed not to be proactively looking for work as part of the job seeker agreement while claiming Job Seekers Allowance (JSA).

Those sanctioned are often the most poor and vulnerable and will face having to live on little or no money.

In 2013, the DWP imposed over a million benefit sanctions throughout the UK that included 1,046,398 sanctions on JSA claimants, 32,128 on Employment and Support Allowance (ESA—sickness benefit) claimants, and approximately 44,000 on lone-parent recipients of Income Support. The number of sanctions

was higher than the number of fines—some 849,000—imposed by Magistrates and Sheriff Courts.

The tragic death in July 2013 of 59 year old David Clapson, a former soldier who suffered with type-1 diabetes, highlights the brutality of the system of sanctions. Clapson died from diabetic ketoacidosis (caused by an acute lack of insulin). His death followed him being sanctioned a few weeks earlier when all his benefits had been cut.

His sister, Gill Thompson, found him in a flat where he had almost nothing to eat, six tea bags and an out-of-date tin of sardines. He had no money for electricity to operate his fridge where his insulin was kept.

The autopsy noted that his stomach was empty. At the time of his death, Clapson had still been trying to find work, evidenced by a pile of new CVs near his body. Following his death, an online petition was launched, signed by over 211,000 people, calling for a government inquiry.

David Woods, a 44 year old man who suffered from mental health problems, starved to death last year following his benefits being reduced to £40 a week. The coroner said the probable cause of death was partly caused by him being “markedly underweight and malnourished.”

Prior to his death, David had attended a mandatory DWP medical visit as part of his claim to ESA and had been found fit for work. Later, a government review found that this decision had been a mistake.

John Pring of the *Disability News Service* said the admission the DWP had looked into 60 cases is significant: “It does seem to be the first kind of solid evidence that the DWP do seem to accept there’s some link between mistakes they make and the deaths of people.” He suspected there were a lot more than 60 from the inquest reports alone. The true number, he

said, could be anywhere from around 60 to several thousand.

Many young people are experiencing severe sanctions despite having tried everything to comply with job searching.

The BBC News web site highlighted the case of Matt, a 25-year-old man who, in December, was living at a YMCA in Burton upon Trent. Matt and other residents of the YMCA had been walking around all day, going door to door handing out their CVs, or ringing employers in the hope of finding work.

When Matt told the staff at the Job Centre about his job search efforts, he described the response he received: “Handing your CV in, the searches you’ve done here—that’s not applying for work. So bye bye, see you later.” Matt received a sanction and told the BBC, “I’m going without money at the moment—no electric, no food.”

The support worker assisting Matt said that he had done everything asked of him by the DWP. At the time of this interview in early December 2014, Matt was waiting for average temperatures to fall to freezing or below for a period of seven days, at which point he would have been able to receive a cold weather payment of £25 a week.

Sanctions have resulted in many youth resorting to food banks in order to eat. The charity said 79 percent of young people referred were a direct result of delays in benefits and punitive sanctions. Nine-out-of-10 YMCAs carried out referrals in 2014.

Up until the late 1980s, the system of sanctions was virtually unheard of in Britain’s social security system. Before then, unemployment benefits were seen as part of an insurance scheme with insurance-style conditions. Any decision on “disqualification” (as it was then termed) from unemployment benefits was made by an independent Adjudication Service with unrestricted right of appeal to an independent tribunal. There was a maximum period of six weeks that a claimant could be disqualified, and those who were disqualified had a right to Supplementary Benefit assessed on the normal rules.

Under the 1997-2010 Labour government, significant punitive conditions were introduced for claimants applying for JSA. Labour also increased sanctions where claimants failed to meet those conditions, including lone parents with older children and disabled

claimants who were deemed able to enter the labour market at some point.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition further strengthened sanctions for those claiming JSA and ESA. Since 2012, this included the sanctioning of benefits for a minimum period of four weeks and up to three years where a claimant is deemed not to have taken sufficient steps to search for work, leaves a job voluntarily, or where they turn down an offer of employment.



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