

# Psychological Tyranny Masquerading as Welfare Reform

Mo Stewart

**SUMMARY:** Influenced by corporate America with an alternative agenda, the ongoing welfare reforms have created preventable harm and psychological tyranny for those too ill to work

**KEY WORDS:** work capability assessment, employment and support allowance

Introduced by the New Labour government, the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) long-term sickness and disability benefit was adopted in the UK by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) in October 2008. Since then, a great deal has been researched and written about the identified preventable harm created by the introduction of the work capability assessment (WCA), as used by the DWP to assess ESA claimants and to restrict access to the benefit (W&P 2014, Garthwaite 2014, Warren et al 2014, Ryan 2015, Barr et al 2015, Patrick 2016, Stewart 2016, Geiger 2017).

No other academic since Rutherford (2007; 2008; 2011) has identified the influence of a corporate American healthcare insurance giant with future UK welfare reforms since 1992 (Stewart, 2016). This American corporate influence with future UK social welfare policies enabled the DWP to introduce the WCA by adopting the fatally flawed biopsychosocial (BPS) assessment (Stewart, 2018a), as recommended by DWP commissioned research (Waddell and Aylward, 2005) when funded by the same American corporate giant when known as

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Mo Stewart originally trained in the NHS as a healthcare professional and is a disabled veteran of the Women's Royal Air Force medical branch. Since 2009 she has worked voluntarily as an independent disability studies researcher.

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UnumProvident<sub>TM</sub> Insurance. As a consequence, the WCA is linked to adverse trends in public mental health for claimants of the ESA (Barr et al, op cit; Pring 2017a, Pring, 2017b).

NHS statistics reveal that almost half of the people claiming the main out-of-work disability benefit in England have attempted suicide at some point in their life. The figures, showing rates of self-harm among claimants of employment and support allowance (ESA), were published by NHS Digital in September 2016, but have apparently never been reported to the media. Although only one in 15 adults (6.7 per cent) in the general population had ever made a suicide attempt, that rose to 43.2 per cent for ESA claimants, and as high as 47.1 per cent for female ESA claimants. Two-thirds of ESA claimants (66 per cent) had thought of taking their own life at some point, compared with 20.6 per cent of the overall population.

Jay Watts, a consultant clinical psychologist and member of the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy, who uncovered the figures, said she felt 'shock and horror followed by, on reflection, an absence of surprise' when she first saw them. 'Being treated like a second-class citizen, being blamed for not being an ideal neoliberal subject, being denied the basic financial means to survive, being sanctioned for being too ill to make an appointment – these belittlements monopolise the internal world and the result is often now suicide.' (Pring, 2017b)

In 2016 new academic research confirmed the Waddell and Aylward BPS model of assessment as adopted for the WCA as being 'policy-based evidence', when referencing Models of Sickness and Disability Applied to Common Health Problems (Waddell and Aylward, 2010); and identified the Waddell and Aylward BPS model as having 'no coherent theory or evidence behind (it)' which demonstrated 'a cavalier approach to scientific evidence' (Shakespeare et al, 2016).

DWP psychological tyranny wasn't difficult to achieve for people too ill to work when using the WCA, especially for claimants with a diagnosis of mental illness (Bell 2015, Marks et al, 2017). Using carefully constructed statements and press releases the DWP continued to manipulate the British public (Stewart, 2017a), when quoting discredited DWP commissioned research evidence. False information was used in many Ministerial speeches (Cohen, 2013). This was enthusiastically reported by the right-leaning tabloid press (Peev, 2010; Hall, 2011; Littlejohn, 2011) on route to the long-ago planned demolition of the UK welfare state to be eventually replaced by private healthcare insurance (Stewart, 2015). The relentless demonization of chronically ill and disabled ESA claimants for five years from 2010 was aided by faked examples of claimants used in a DWP leaflet to justify savage benefit sanctions (BBC, 2015; WW, 2015a), which removed all income from claimants due to minor transgressions. This resulted in death by starvation (Gentleman, 2014) of some of the most vulnerable people in the country when, quite literally, 'killed by the State' (Elward, 2016, p29), when

using the BPS model of assessment for the WCA (Stewart, 2018b). The WCA is a replica of the non-medical assessment model used by the American research sponsors UnumProvident<sub>TM</sub> Insurance to resist funding healthcare insurance claims (Stewart 2015,). Sanctioning claimants for deemed non-compliance was identified in the Unum sponsored research (Waddell and Aylward 2005, p166), which the DWP have used to excess since 2010 (Webster, 2018).

The impact of the WCA on distress and mortality rates are concerning and can be deemed State Crime by Proxy (SCBP). This is because the harms produced by Maximus are produced by order of the state, whose policies permit – even encourage – the mistreatment of claimants. WCAs could be deemed criminal because they represent the systematic targeting of society's weakest citizens (Crisis, 2012). These people are helpless against such institutional power, as the strain the WP places upon claimants pushes many into a social abyss or early graves. WCA processes could arguably be viewed as democide, as some claimants are, in essence, killed by the state or officials acting on their behalf (Totten and Barttop, 2008). This means that Maximus are also culpable because they are acting according to DWP policy which is proven to cause death with the approval of state officials; the government is purposely permitting or creating conditions which systematically produce death (Elward, op cit).

There was, therefore, no surprise when prosecuted disability hate crimes increased by 213 per cent from 2008, and especially during the Coalition government's term in office (WW, 2015b), aided by the reported hostile and often dangerous rhetoric of Iain Duncan Smith MP when Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. He regularly and knowingly misled Parliament and the country regarding various statistics, and used the false statistics to justify his many unsupported claims of his version of a 'dependency culture' (Cohen, 2013).

A decade ago, Professor Jonathan Rutherford had been warning about the influence of UnumProvident<sub>TM</sub> Insurance with future UK welfare reforms (Rutherford, 2007), as he identified the increasing role of corporate involvement with the public sector. He alerted readers to the November 2001 Malingering and Illness Deception Conference (Halligan et al, 2003), which was attended by thirty-nine participants including Malcolm Wicks, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Work for the New Labour government, and by Mansel Aylward, his Chief Medical Officer at the DWP. The plan was to stop Incapacity Benefit (IB), as used by the DWP for long-term sickness benefit, and replace it not only with another benefit but with a different welfare system to significantly limit the number of people supported by the State when too ill to work. Rutherford exposed this American corporate influence with the UK welfare state in an opinion piece in *The Guardian* in March 2008 (Rutherford, 2008), but the national press has since been silent.

What linked them all together, including Aylward, was their association with the giant US income protection company UnumProvident, represented at the conference by John LoCascio. The goal was the transformation of the welfare system. The cultural meaning of illness would be redefined; growing numbers of claimants would be declared fit for work and 'motivated' into jobs. A new work ethic would transform IB recipients into entrepreneurs helping themselves out of poverty and into self-reliance. Five years later these goals would take a tangible form in New Labour's 2006 Welfare Reform Bill. (Jonathan Rutherford)

Identified in 2008 by the American Association of Justice as the second worst insurance company in America (AAJ, 2008, p6), the British national press was again informed about the influence of UnumProvident<sup>TM</sup> Insurance on the planned UK welfare reforms as long ago as 2010, but refused to alert the British public. The claim at the time was that they 'didn't dare' to expose the influence of a corporate giant in fear of possible future litigation. The question remains as to how many more government-funded atrocities are hidden from the British public when the national press, en masse, refuse to offer significant information to their readers which is already available in the public domain?

Happily, at least one independent journalist retained his moral and ethical integrity. John Pring, the Editor of the Disability News Service, has willingly published detailed evidence of the influence of corporate America with UK welfare reforms for several years (Pring, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2016), as the numbers of ESA claimants dying following a WCA are no longer available via the DWP, who refused to publish updated ESA mortality totals (Patel, 2016).

Prior to the introduction of the WCA, the DWP had commissioned a working group to advise the DWP regarding the adoption of the assessment for disability benefit claimants. The DWP were warned against the adoption of the WCA, which was identified as being damaging, counterproductive and guaranteed to negatively impact on population mental health (Pring, 2015). Professor Geoffrey Shepherd, a consultant clinical psychologist and expert on mental health and employment, exposed the fact that the DWP were 'ruthless' and 'reckless' when going ahead with the adoption of the WCA against expert medical opinion (Pring, 2015).

Shepherd is one of three mental health specialists to have spoken to Disability News Service about their work as members of the mental health technical working group used by DWP to help design the WCA in 2006 and 2007:

The fact that the process is so bad makes it stressful, because it's a bit like Russian roulette: you don't know if there's a bullet in the chamber or not. That's hardly going to make you feel comfortable. It's predictable that it is going to be stressful because of the arbitrary nature of the outcomes, because of the way it was done

itself, because it was so much depending on the single interview on a single day. I can very easily believe that it would damage people's mental health, at least in the short-term, and I can believe that it might lead to suicide. Obviously there are some tragic stories here about individuals and what happened to them. I think it is tragic and I think it is reckless the way the DWP continued even in the face of evidence that it (WCA) was damaging. (Pring, op cit)

Frances Ryan, writes the 'Hardworking Britain' column for *The Guardian* and her column has finally alerted readers to some of the human consequences of the ongoing welfare reforms and severe austerity measures adopted by successive UK governments since 2010. Following the appearance of ESA mortality totals (DWP 2015), published following direction from the Information Commissioner's Office, it was established that between December 2011 and February 2014 a total of 50,580 ESA claimants had died following the WCA, with 2,380 claimants dying after being found 'fit for work' (DWP 2015, p8). Frances Ryan highlighted the fact that more than '80 people a month are now dying after being found 'fit for work'. The safety net that used to be there for the most vulnerable is being torn to shreds.' (Ryan, 2015)

The ESA mortality totals also identified a total of 7,200 claimants who had died after being placed in the Work-Related Activity Group, deemed by the DWP following a WCA, which obliged people to prepare to go back to work whilst living with a chronic illness (DWP 2015, p6).

Government rhetoric constantly claimed that the DWP 'welfare reforms' were helping disabled people into work, that work was good for health, and Iain Duncan Smith's claimed 'sickness benefit culture' (Deacon 2015) would be resolved with opportunities for sick and disabled people to find employment. The claimed help for long-term sick and disabled ESA claimants included DWP letters threatening sanctions for non-attendance at WCA centres which were often inaccessible to wheelchair users.

As this relentless DWP coercion has progressed, aided by the persecution of the disabled community by the tabloid press, disability support groups have formed an antidote to this psychological tyranny. Disabled People Against Cuts (DPAC) is by far the largest group who, over the years, have organised public protests that have seen thousands of disabled people and their supporters marching in protest against the government's welfare reforms, and causing major disruption. This all proved fruitless as the DWP and government Ministers weren't listening.

The demonizing of chronically ill and disabled people since 2010 has been very successful. Those in greatest need live in fear of the DWP: fear of another brown envelope arriving to demand yet another WCA (Garthwaite, 2014), often for a permanent health condition that can't be cured regardless of coercion or

intimidation. The excessive use of DWP sanctions, which removes all income from chronically ill people has negatively impacted on public mental health, with claimants living in fear of the consequences of being unable to fund rent, utility bills or food. There is no concern expressed by the DWP, who maintain an indifference to human need with a refusal to conduct a cumulative impact assessment to identify the often-fatal impact of welfare reforms and austerity measures (Ryan, 2018).

The combination of neoliberal politics with austerity for the past eight years has successfully created a society of suspicion. There remains a 'deserving' or 'underserving' distinction when judging chronically ill and disabled people in need of State financial support, always guaranteed to negatively impact on wellbeing and survival (Thomas, 2016).

The most vulnerable in society are paying a high price for the political ideology of neoliberalism; some with their lives. Suicides and deaths are the tip of the iceberg of misery and suffering experienced by those who are physically or mentally unfit for work, as the government implements an increasingly punitive and authoritarian regime against benefit claimants. Vulnerable people are left destitute by sanctions that suspend or end their benefits if they fail to comply with orders to attend 'assessments', 'training courses', or submit the required number of job applications. (Thomas, 2016)

Despite High Court rulings against the DWP demonstrating, in one case, that the DWP 'blatantly discriminates' against people with mental health problems (Bulman, 2018), it makes little difference to the Department who claim they will need several years to reconsider the 160,000 claims identified by the court. The Department admitted that they had found 'errors' in the system, which meant they had underpaid many thousands of ESA claimants (Ryan, 2017). Yet, there is no rush to confirm that all those under-funded have been repaid; and the DWP were also dismissive of a 2016 United Nations report (Jones et al, 2017), that identified that the UK government were in breach of the human rights of sick and disabled people. Given the lack of authority by the UN to hold any country to account, once again there is no accountability for the psychological tyranny and preventable harm linked to the DWP social policies, adopted since the introduction of austerity in 2010. This all links back to the identified 'dark legacy' of Margaret Thatcher, which has never disappeared:

Materialistic individualism was blessed as a virtue, the driver of national success. Everything was justified as long as it made money – and this, too, is still with us. Thatcherism failed to destroy the welfare state. The lady was too shrewd to try that, and barely succeeded in reducing the share of the national income taken by the public sector. But the sense of community evaporated.

There turned out to be no such thing as society, at least in the sense we used to understand it. Whether pushing people off the road, barging past social rivals, beating up rival soccer fans, or idolising wealth as the only measure of virtue, Brits became more unpleasant to be with. (Young, 2013).

By definition, the removal of perceived care, concern, compassion, dignity and humanity when using an enforced assessment is identified as a 'deliberately prejudiced, vicious attack on a significant minority of the population' (Beresford 2017) which, in other words, is government enforced tyranny against the most vulnerable people in society. There are now three million chronically ill and disabled people living in fear of the DWP (Stewart, op cit).

With little evidence of any significant new political challenge, and no politician in the House of Commons recently exposing the influence of Unum (Provident) Insurance on the UK welfare reforms since 1992 the question remains as to how many more chronically ill and disabled people will die when, quite literally, 'killed by the State' (Elward, op cit); with a UK government perilously close to charges of identified Crimes Against Humanity (Stewart, 2014; 2017b).

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