



# Mo Stewart Research

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Phone:

Text:

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*“The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse.”*

Edmund Burke

**Peter Schofield CB**

**Permanent Secretary**

Private & Confidential

**Department for Work and Pensions**

Caxton House

Tothill Street

London

SW1H 9DA

*Sent electronically:*

Dear Permanent Secretary

Re: The public health crisis created by UK social policy reforms

[\*Justice, Power and Resistance\*](#) <sup>1</sup>

I write in my capacity as the research lead for the Preventable Harm Project <sup>2</sup> that I have led since 2009, to alert you to an identified public health crisis directly linked to the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), as adopted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to limit access to long-term disability benefit when aided by the use of commercial assessment providers to conduct the assessment. <sup>1,2,3</sup>

To justify the adoption of harsh and unnecessary austerity measures, which were introduced without ethical approval, the Coalition administration elected in 2010 vehemently challenged the integrity of the chronically ill and disabled community and routinely accused disability benefit claimants of fraud; while failing to produce evidence to support their claims. Their often hostile rhetoric encouraged a 213 percent increase in prosecuted disability hate crimes, and successive administrations disregarded the thousands of deaths directly linked to the Work Capability Assessment, which was adopted using a discredited and dangerous biopsychosocial model of assessment to restrict access to long-term disability benefit. Influenced by corporate America since 1992, the UK social policy reforms guaranteed that many of those in greatest need were destined to die when, covertly, killed by the state. <sup>1</sup>

Historically, the public health crisis <sup>1</sup> now identified as being caused by the continued use of the WCA was predictable, and it is cause for serious concern that the DWP's own technical and medical experts advised against the adoption of the WCA in 2005 but their expert opinion was totally disregarded. <sup>4</sup> It is also cause for serious concern to note that the WCA was



adopted using the Waddell-Aylward biopsychosocial (BPS) model of assessment, despite the fact that peer-reviewed published academic research totally discredited the evidence and exposed the Waddell-Aylward BPS model as '*conceptually and empirically invalid*', '*having no coherent theory or evidence behind this model*' and concluded that it was '*a chilling example of policy-based evidence*'.<sup>5</sup> This '*policy-based evidence*' was demonstrated in the 2005 Waddell-Aylward<sup>6</sup> commissioned report, which made recommendations adopted by the New Labour administration to justify the introduction of the WCA.<sup>7</sup>

Commonly known as 'welfare reforms' the combination of social policy reforms, together with the adoption of increasingly punitive conditionality using financial sanctions, increases the prevalence of psychological distress identified within the disabled community...

Aylward's first commission at the Centre was by the DWP to research possible reductions of the welfare budget, which generated 'The Scientific and Conceptual Basis of Incapacity Benefit' report co-authored by Gordon Waddell, a former orthopedic surgeon. The report recommended a non-medical BPS model of disability assessment with a reduction of IB claimant numbers by one million (p12), the reduction of the value of IB to the equivalent of the income for unemployment benefit (p99), and the use of sanctions for non-compliance of conditionality by claimants (p165-167)...

It is often incorrectly assumed that the WCA is based on medical opinion with politicians, academics, and journalists regularly referring to the WCA as a 'medical assessment'. In reality, the WCA is unrelated to medicine or to clinical opinion. Influenced by corporate America, the WCA was designed as a non-medical functional assessment, which totally disregards diagnosis, prognosis, prescribed medicines and past medical history...

The increased use of benefit sanctions, which stops all income for weeks or months, was often imposed when disabled claimants were too ill to attend DWP appointments. This has led to some very ill ESA claimants starving to death, for which there is no apparent redress and no apparent government concern. This social re-engineering has established profound negative mental health consequences, as the UK welfare state is gradually demolished in advance of it being eventually replaced by a new welfare system using private health insurance, which is the long-held political ambition that enjoys bipartisan support.<sup>7</sup>

Initially adopted in 2008 by the New Labour administration to limit access to the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), more recently the WCA is used to assess chronically ill and disabled claimants for Universal Credit (UC). For many of those in greatest need, the WCA is a traumatic experience which leaves the chronically ill and disabled community living in fear of the DWP, whose financial support is of critical importance for their physical and financial survival. This identified '*institutional violence*'<sup>8</sup> is demonstrated by the abuse of authority by DWP staff towards service-users who claim access to benefit when unable to work, but who suffer the distressing consequences of making a claim when persecuted by the state.<sup>8,9,10</sup>



Each additional 10 000 people reassessed in each area was associated with 6 suicides, 2700 cases of reported mental health problems, and the prescribing of an additional 7020 antidepressant items. The reassessment process was associated with the greatest increases in these adverse mental health outcomes in the most deprived areas of the country, widening health inequalities...

Our results have important implications for policy. The WCA and reassessment policy was introduced without prior evidence of its potential impact or any plans to evaluate its effects... Our study provides an initial investigation of the mental health effects of this natural policy experiment, indicating that it may have substantial adverse consequences for mental health... Given that doctors and other health professionals have professional and statutory duties to protect and promote the health of patients and the public, our evidence that this process is potentially harming to recipients of these assessments raises major ethical issues for those involved. <sup>10</sup>

More cause for concern is identified when coroners' *'prevention of future deaths'* reports, which identify the WCA as being linked to suicide are totally disregarded by the DWP.<sup>11</sup> Also, a plan for a much needed independent review of DWP sanctions was scrapped,<sup>12</sup> despite a publication by the Public Law Project that identified that *'the system for challenging benefit sanctions poses significant harm to the health, finances, and well-being of claimants'*.<sup>13</sup>

It is my understanding that one of your duties as Permanent Secretary is to advise the government with a responsibility for *'supporting proper and effective decision making'*.<sup>14</sup> That being the case, I believe you have been provided with a sample of evidence which identifies the public health crisis created by the WCA, which is a subject that DWP Ministers constantly shy away from. The Secretary of State is aware of the WCA danger. You could encourage him to end this identified *'politics of fear'*.<sup>15</sup>

The ongoing DWP devotion to reducing welfare costs cannot continue to be at the expense of the lives of many of those in greatest need.<sup>16</sup>

Yours, most sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mo Stewart', written in a cursive style.

**Mo Stewart**

Fellow, Centre for Welfare Reform  
Research Lead, Preventable Harm Project



Copied to: Sir Stephen Timms MP – Chair, Work & Pensions Committee  
Caroline Selman – Research Fellow, Public Law Project



## Internet references

- 1 [The public health crisis created by UK social policy reforms – Mo Stewart](#)
- 2 [Preventable Harm Project](#)
- 3 [The Impact of Neoliberal Politics on the Welfare and Survival of Chronically Ill and Disabled People](#)
- 4 [‘Ruthless’ DWP ‘forced through WCA despite knowing of harm’](#)
- 5 [Blaming the victim all over again: Waddell and Aylward’s biopsychosocial \(BPS\) model of disability](#)
- 6 [The Scientific and Conceptual Basis of Incapacity Benefits](#)
- 7 [What price preventable harm: social policies designed to disregard human need](#)
- 8 [Violent bureaucracy: A critical analysis of the British public employment service - Jamie Redman, Del Roy Fletcher, 2022 \(sagepub.com\)](#)
- 9 [Preventable Harm: creating a mental health crisis](#)
- 10 [‘First, do no harm’: are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? A longitudinal ecological study. Journal of Epidemiol and Community Health 70, 339–345.](#)
- 11 [DWP dismissed coroner’s concerns over WCA suicide link, document reveals](#)
- 12 [Coffey scrapped plan for independent review of sanctions, DWP admits](#)
- 13 [Benefit Sanctions: A Presumption of Guilt](#)
- 14 [Permanent Secretary Individual Performance Objectives](#)
- 15 [The Politics of Fear \(citizen-network.org\)](#)
- 16 [Killed By The State](#)