

DEVELOPING THE EVIDENCE TO CHALLENGE

‘WELFARE REFORM’

~ the road to ‘Cash Not Care’

Mo Stewart

INTRODUCTION

Eight years ago I would not have described myself as a ‘researcher’. Eight years ago I had no need to be a ‘researcher’. That all changed in December 2008 when I was confronted by a staff member employed by a company generally known as ‘Atos Healthcare’. The company were under contract to the British government to conduct the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), introduced in October 2008 by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to limit access to the new Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) income replacement sickness benefit.

The Atos Healthcare visitor claimed to be a doctor, yet refused to offer any form of identity when he entered my home for what was meant to be a medical review of my War Pension. He behaved unethically, going out of his way to create tension; refused to offer eye contact when devoting all his attention to firing off meaningless questions and entering my answers in his laptop. When I attempted to hold a conversation, he unceremoniously dismissed me with an offensive wave of his hand.

A War Pension is not a benefit and, until April 2005, it was the medical pension provided for disabled personnel who were medically discharged from military service with a permanent and significant disability. It is unrelated to long-term sickness benefit funded by the DWP.

In December 2008 I hadn’t heard of the WCA and I wasn’t anticipating any problem with the War Pension review medical. I had no idea that the DWP had adopted a ‘non-medical’ assessment model, as influenced by the discredited corporate American healthcare insurance giant, UnumProvident Insurance, who were appointed in 1994 as official government advisers for ‘welfare claims management’ in order to reduce the future DWP welfare budget. The corporate giant government advisers changed their name to Unum Insurance in 2007, following relentless legal challenges in America.^{1, 2}

Regarding the War Pension review, the Atos Healthcare report was a work of fiction when using the WCA and claimed that I had no physical limitations, whilst disregarding all previously provided very detailed medical evidence. This claim challenged my integrity and I

‘went to war’ with the then Service Personnel and Veterans Agency (SPVA) to clear my name. I refused to permit some SPVA administrator to suggest that I was dishonest and this was eventually resolved when a Consultant visited me on behalf of the Appeal Tribunal. His detailed and accurate medical report exonerated me and exposed the Atos Healthcare report as being ‘*preposterous*’.

The journey to find justice took two years involving a protracted battle with the SPVA and thus began my personal ‘voyage of research discovery’, as I realised that the evidence I was uncovering for my own battle had implications for other chronically sick and disabled people who would eventually have to endure the WCA, which is based on the totally discredited biopsychosocial (BPS) model of assessment.³

FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL

Whilst my increasing disability was belatedly acknowledged by the SPVA, and the War Pension was eventually increased and backdated, nevertheless, I faced a moral dilemma as the evidence I had discovered when challenging the Atos Healthcare WCA report clearly needed to be shared with other long term sick and disabled people. Forewarned is forearmed.

I began sharing the research evidence with the new and growing number of Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) and, by 2010, my first research report ‘*Atos Healthcare or Disability Denial Factories*’⁴ was published thanks to the kindness of my original Webmaster, Mike Bach, who willingly shared his website at *Why Wait Forever*.⁵ to permit my research evidence to be published online. The research evidence was welcomed by DPOs and reproduced on a variety of websites, as claimants began offering the evidence to MPs who asked questions about the WCA in the House of Commons.

As my research continued I began sharing the evidence with members of the House of Lords (HoL) and, by 2011, I was invited to provide a research briefing for a welfare reform debate in the HoL. *Welfare Reform ~ Redress for the Disabled*⁶ was quoted by Baroness Tanni GreyThompson, exposing the influence of the American corporate giant Unum Insurance with the DWP welfare reforms, and the fact that Atos Healthcare were not registered with the health and social care regulator, the Care Quality Commission, so the general public had no protection from malpractice.

My early research reports were written for and on behalf of other long term sick and disabled people. They were not intended as academic papers but straightforward reports, exposing a lot of information that could be understood by the lay public when identifying the corporate influence behind the introduction of the WCA.

As a former healthcare professional, I had already established that the WCA was a bogus and dangerous assessment model. The WCA was described by the DWP as a ‘functional assessment’, which seemingly justified the fact that the appointed Atos Healthcare ‘health

professional' would conduct the WCA without access to the claimant's past medical history. The diagnosis and prognosis would be totally disregarded by basic grade DWP administrators who were given the title of 'Decision Makers' and, from this limited evidence, I knew that the WCA could cause preventable harm and that many ESA claimants were likely to die – as indeed they have. But I had to prove it, and little did I know that it would take almost seven years to complete my task. Over time, I was to become a very experienced researcher!

THE LESSONS LEARNED

Eventually, I approached academics at various universities, whose research tends to be published in peer reviewed academic journals that few people know of, and even fewer will have accessed due to the costs involved. I discovered that the cost of such access was prohibitive for me, so I nervously began to contact the academics to seek access from them. Without exception, all those I contacted willingly shared their research papers and encouraged my efforts. I was to learn the great value of detailed independent academic research, which was not funded by a discredited American corporate giant or commissioned by the DWP.

When conducting my research, the first thing I needed to learn was *persistence*. DWP administrators think that questions can be dismissed by a standard reply, whilst failing to answer a direct question with a direct answer. I also needed to adopt *patience* when requesting access to evidence from busy academics and other professionals. This coincided with the realisation that they were under no obligation to help me as I pursued the evidence with no budget, and without the academic qualifications to suggest that I was capable of conducting the research.

During what was to become six years of in-depth research, together with another 12 months needed to write the book: *CASH NOT CARE ~ the planned demolition of the UK welfare state*, no-one I approached ever dismissed my request for help, and a handful of academics went the extra mile to help me, including promoting my book when it was released in September 2016.

I learned that human decency still exists, even from strangers whom I'll never meet, yet who did anything they could to help me to produce the book.

The research exposed the fact that the British welfare reforms were a duplicate of American designed welfare policies, as both nations had conducted simultaneous attacks on their most vulnerable citizens, jointly planned over twenty years ago.

ENCOUNTERING AND OVERCOMING PROBLEMS

Little did I know when I began the research what disturbing evidence I would often find. This produced frequent moral challenges, as I knew that some of the evidence could cause distress to readers who might already be very, very ill. I'm not certain I ever overcame the concern

that something I wrote could cause distress to a vulnerable claimant, but I told myself that the evidence must be exposed.

The self-funded book '*CASH NOT CARE: the planned demolition of the UK welfare state*' was released by New Generation Publishing on 14th September 2016 and has enjoyed approval from academics, professionals and DPOs.⁷ The national press refused to expose research evidence described as '*government funded tyranny*' claiming they '*would not risk*' exposing a corporate giant's influence with the UK government in fear of possible future litigation. *CASH NOT CARE* is available from stock via Blackwell's books⁸ in Oxford, who are the only retailer in the UK to stock the book. The text is available to order via Waterstones books⁹ and the eBook version is available via W H SMITH¹⁰, with all versions available online via Amazon.

CONCLUSION

What began as an investigation into the unacceptable behaviour of a staff member from Atos Healthcare, who carried out a WCA instead of a War Pension review, became what I have termed my 'voyage of research discovery'.

The research opened the door to contact with some exceptional people, who have gone out of their way to encourage my efforts, to support my research and to use the evidence I reported. This includes other chronically sick and disabled people, with DPOs publishing my research on a variety of websites to inform their readers. I have benefitted from help from national charities, military charities, independent professionals and, especially, from academics who were very enthusiastic that their research findings, which were usually restricted to academic journals, would be cited and quoted in my book and accessed by a wider general public.

My research reports have been quoted during debate in both the House of Lords and the House of Commons, and a number of noble members appear to trust my judgement and consult me regarding my area of expertise.

What began as a personal battle to restore my integrity became, over time, a very long journey of research discovery that culminated in September 2016 with the publication of my book, *CASH NOT CARE*. From my 2008 Atos Healthcare assessment to the publication of the book, involved a total of eight years of independent research. And the future seems promising as I have now been invited to offer a personal seminar to the new Disability Law hub at the Centre for Disability Studies, Leeds University and to give talks to various groups, including the National Union of Students disability forum. Whilst the book is complete, the research continues.

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BIOGRAPHY

Mo Stewart is a medically retired healthcare professional, a disabled female veteran and, for the last eight years, has worked voluntarily as an independent researcher investigating the history behind the introduction of the Work Capability Assessment by the Department for Work and Pensions, with evidence from the research used during welfare reform debates in the House of Lords and the House of Commons since 2011.

Originally written for the benefit of chronically sick and disabled people who historically don't have a voice, Mo's research exposed the influence of a notorious American healthcare insurance

giant with the UK future welfare reforms since 1992, and her book: '*CASH NOT CARE ~ the planned demolition of the UK welfare state*' has attracted wide academic interest and critical acclaim.

(1997 words)