NAWRA condemns misrepresentation, fraud and error in media reports on sickness benefits statistics

Following complaints by members, the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers has roundly condemned misleading, inaccurate and distorted media reporting that seeks to demonise claimants of benefits for sickness.

“Some blame must also lie in the spin and distortion from Ministers and the DWP ” commented Alan Markey, Chair of NAWRA, “However that does not exclude serious journalists – particularly editors - from checking their facts before indulging in lurid stories aimed at harassing, stigmatising and demonising whole groups in our society”

NAWRA’s concerns relate to the latest quarterly report of figures for the Employment and Support Allowance which is taking over from previous benefits for sickness.

Under the headline: *“Blitz on benefits; 887,000 fiddlers exposed”* the Daily Express went on to report that:

 *“nearly half a million people were exposed as being fit for work after undergoing medical tests in a Government crackdown on welfare scroungers”.“*

*And a further 428,000 voluntarily dropped their claims before completing the assessments – making a total of 887,000”.*

The Express goes on to say that this *“suggests that £4 billion of taxpayer’s money is wrongly paid out every year to workshy spongers feigning serious disability”*

The reason why *“fresh outrage over Britain’s sicknote culture erupted”*  - although the location of said outrage is not specified- seems to be Employment Minister Chris Grayling facile conclusion that “we know now that that the vast majority of new claimants are in fact able to return to work”

NAWRA’s assessment of the facts show that the story is a bit more complicated than Grayling and the Express would have it:

* 428,000 people in the last year did indeed come off ESA before the assessment that routinely occurs at week 13, but not necessarily because of any fear of being found out. They may have got better, returned to work or died. For example a hard working self employed target Daily Express reader may be unable to work from a broken arm and claims ESA but is back in work long before the assessment is due
* The remaining 461,000 who fail the assessment will all have genuine illnesses or disabilities certified by their GP and will be unwell – in some cases quite severely. However, they will fail to score the necessary 15 points under a revised test to allow them to continue on Employment and Support Allowance.
* A finding that a claimant does not pass the test is an assessment of the degree of their illness or disability and the appropriate benefit regime implied not the fact that a person has a genuine limiting illness.
* The test before that for ESA was already the toughest among OECD countries – the new test simply raises the bar further.
* The majority of claimants tended to underestimate their limitations and the DWP estimate of fraud and error in the system was 0.5%.

*“The trouble is that the assessment process is deeply flawed”* commented Phil Hanns, Vice Chair of NAWRA. *“Many people who are disallowed go on to win an appeal as inadequate, snapshot medicls are used to determine often complex illnesses and conditions.*

*“Even where the assessment is correct, it is a judgement based on a test, whose authors point to the potential for a significant gap between failing the test and having effective employability”.*

Essentially the premise behind welfare reform is not that people on the old benefits were not sick , but that many can be supported into work, under one of a variety of benefit regimes with different levels of support and conditionality, from purely voluntary engagement to full jobseeking regimes of “actively seeking and being available for work”. Anecdotally, Jobcentre staff are reporting that this may be very difficult for many of the claimants coming over from ESA, even with extended support and more flexible adjustment of the usual JSA regimes.

“*Of course cynically you could see a switch to JSA as just meaning less benefit or none at all”* reflected Tom Messere, South Wales representative “*But whatever the arguments as to which benefit should apply, what is absolutely clear is that almost every one of these claimants is genuinely ill, whether for a short period before assessment or through an assessment process that determines which regime will apply”*

*“The only fraud and misrepresentation would seem to be in the Express’ simplistic and mean spirited coverage, however much they may feel egged on by the Minister’s words. There is no excuse for a vicious campaign to demonise a whole section of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society . Is it not high time that demonising people simply because they claim benefits became as socially unacceptable as labelling people because of race or gender?”*