

Appendix 1: Inaccuracies outlined in detail

1 *Nearly 900,000 people drop claims for incapacity benefit*

“878,300 have chosen to drop their claim [for Employment and Support Allowance] entirely rather than face a medical assessment”.

Grant Shapps MP, Conservative Party Chairman, reported by the Press Association on 30th March 2013.

<http://uk.news.yahoo.com/nearly-900-000-drop-benefit-claims-225950176.html#5Spmwy2>

The implication of this story – confirmed in later media interviews – was that these people were claiming benefits to which they were not entitled, and they stopped their claim because they believed they would fail the test.

Timing

The story was timed to be in the newspapers on 31st March (Easter Day). This coincided with rolling out of a raft of benefit changes, including the under-occupation penalty, Personal Independence Payments and the Benefit Uprating Bill, all of which significantly reduce the level of support given to the sick and disabled.

The portrayal of people receiving disability benefits avoiding medical tests likely influenced the public's opinion of the justice of reducing the benefits the disabled receive.

Explanation of Error

The process of claiming ESA involves a 13-week assessment period prior to the Work Capability Assessment (WCA). To receive any benefit during this time, the claimant must demonstrate that they are unfit to work normally by providing medical certificates from their GP.

The 878,300 number refers to every time since October 2008 an individual has stopped claiming ESA during this 13-week assessment period. Many who have relatively short-term problems leave the process during this period simply because they no longer need support. Indeed the large numbers of people who need such short-term help is one of the reasons why a 13-week delay has been designed into the system.

The DWP has produced a comprehensive analysis of those who leave ESA in the first 13 weeks and found that, as is proper, most cease to claim because they are fit to work. Another important and proper reason for ceasing to claim was increased family income due to a partner's work meaning that they no longer qualified for this means-tested benefit. Only “a small number” ceased to claim when the WCA invitation arrived and again there was no evidence of dishonesty in the original claim¹.

¹ http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/report_abstracts/rr_abstracts/rra_762.asp

Any implication that a large number of people – let alone 878,300 people – are abusing the assessment phase of the ESA system is unsupported by the evidence. In purely semantic terms the inaccuracy in the press release lies with the words “rather than”.

In moral terms the problem lies in implying that people are fraudulent when the evidence shows that they are in fact doing the right thing and ending their claim for sickness benefit as soon as they are no longer sick.

2 The Benefit Cap has caused 8,000 people to decide to enter work

“Already we’ve seen 8,000 people who would have been affected by the cap move into jobs. This clearly demonstrates that the cap is having the desired impact.” Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, quoted in the Daily Mail on 12th April 2013.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2308159/16-000-fewer-households-affected-benefits-cap-500-half-jobs-rest-moved-cheaper-houses.html#ixzz2SbzTWmB>

Timing

The timing of these statements coincided with the introduction of the new Total Benefit Cap. The false impression was created that the DWP had reliable evidence that people affected by the Benefit Cap were being successfully moved into work as a result of the policy. This is likely to have made the public reaction to the introduction of the Total Benefit Cap less hostile and enabled the policy to be more easily accepted by the public.

Explanation of error

Two separate pieces of information are misused in various combinations to lead to the conclusion that the policy is having the effect of moving families into work. The sets of data concerned are the revised DWP estimate reducing the numbers that are expected to be affected by the Total Benefit Cap by 16,000 and the ad-hoc statistics that 8,000 claimants who were potentially subject to the Total Benefit Cap had gained employment since May 2012.

Neither set of data separately or together can speak to changed behaviour as a result of the policy. Both publications explicitly state they cannot be used to infer that the Benefit Cap policy has changed behaviour, yet both sets of data were used to state that policy had changed people’s behaviour.

It is clear that policy may change behaviour; it is also clear that there is no evidence in the statistics to indicate what that change would be or even if it is happening. It is unacceptable for Ministers to state that data, supportive of their point of view, exists when it does not.

The employment minister and the DWP Press Office have subsequently sought to defend the claim that the Benefit Cap has caused people to go out and find work by citing their personal observations of how Job Centres are working with potentially affected benefit claimants. While

they may genuinely hold this belief, that cannot make it acceptable to take an accurate well-presented Government statistic and twist it to make a point unsupported by the evidence.

3 DLA “Closing-down sale”

*“The decision to introduce new tests has produced an extraordinary ‘closing-down sale’ effect, with rocketing claims as people rush to get their hands on unchecked ‘welfare for life’ before McVey’s axe falls on April 8.” Esther McVey MP, the minister for Disabled People
30/03/2013*

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2301735/I-bogus-disabled--DO-better-Ex-TV-host-new-Work-Minister-UKs-THREE-MILLION-claiming-disability-benefit.html>

This statement was later repeated by *Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions*, in a series of interviews, which have been widely reported.

For example:

“There are websites dedicated to telling you how to avoid the pitfalls of making a claim for DLA. We have seen a bit of a rise in the run-up to PIP (personal independence payment) – in some parts of the North West a doubling in claims.

“And you know why? They know PIP has a health check. They want to get in early, get ahead of it. It’s a case of ‘get your claim in early’.”

Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions quoted in the Daily Mail <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2305556/Last-minute-rush-avoid-tough-new-test-disability-benefit.html>

Timings

The story first appeared on 31st March (Easter Monday). It coincided with rolling out of a raft of benefit changes, including the under-occupation penalty (commonly known as the Bedroom Tax), Personal Independence Payments and the Benefit Up-rating Bill - all of which significantly reduce the level of support given to the sick and disabled.

The second appearance of the misrepresentation was on 8th April when Personal Independence Payments was introduced for new claimants. This is also when the inaccurate statistical data to support the claim was first produced.

Sick and disabled people have been portrayed as applying for disability benefits in order to avoid medical tests. This is likely to have had an effect on public opinion as to the justice of reducing the benefits the disabled receive, the need for a new medical test to be introduced and the honesty of DLA claimants in general. Any negative inference on DLA claimants from this evidence is utterly unwarranted and unjust.

Explanation of error:

Initially no evidence was given for these claims. Analysis of both DWP and Nomis (ONS) data does not support the assertion that people have chosen to “get their claim in early” or even that there is a spike in the number of new DLA claims. Indeed the data shows the number of new claimants to be marginally decreasing – consistent with the long-term pattern which has characterised the past decade.

Using the largest numbers available (all ages and geographical locations) the quarterly numbers for new claimants have only been lower twice in the last decade.²

Analysis of working age new claimants or regional breakdowns of new claimants tells a similar story – no changes in the number of new claimants that fall outside the normal pattern. Should ministers have other data on which they are commenting they have a duty to disclose it – but that does not appear to be what has happened.

In the 8th April in the *Daily Telegraph* some data was given to back up the claims:

“In the North East of England, where reforms to disability benefits are being introduced, there was an increase of 2,600 in claims over the last year, up from 1,700 the year before, the minister told the Daily Mail.

In the North West, there were 4,100 claims for the benefits over the past 12 months, more than double the 1,800 in the previous year, he said.”

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/9978231/Disabled-benefit-claimants-flooding-welfare-system-to-get-ahead-of-test-warns-Iain-Duncan-Smith.html>

These figures, attributed to the Secretary of State, and used to support the Secretary of State's claims that specific regions of the country have seen a surge in new claimants have not appeared in any official release and their source is opaque. The numbers *do not* correspond to any official estimates of the number of new claimants. Such estimates are available and show the number of new claims falling.

The numbers *do* however correspond to the change in the total number of people claiming DLA between August 2011 and August 2012.

Using change in caseload as a measure of the number of new claims is a statistical nonsense – caseload data is affected by the rate of people leaving as well as the numbers joining. To use this number rather than the readily available accurate data is hugely incompetent or dishonest and is most certainly highly misleading.

It is worth noting that this is the only conceivable way of manipulating the data to tell the story of people rushing to apply for DLA in order to avoid the PIP medical assessment – a story which is useful in supporting the case for change from DLA to PIP. Public data shows the story to be demonstrably false.

² Using the latest available NOMIS data the number of new DLA claims (claims under 3 months) in August 2012 was 40,570. The average number of new claims over the past decade 10 years was 48,510 per quarter, and the average over the previous year 43,385 per quarter.