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YOU AND YOURS – BAD BENEFIT ASSESSMENTS BY DOCTORS - 16.01.03

PRESENTER: Winifred Robinson

ROBINSON

If you're disabled and you want to claim benefits you must first be assessed by a doctor. So these doctors are gatekeepers to a raft of payments - disability living allowance, attendance allowance and incapacity benefit. The benefits can amount to hundreds of pounds a month for individual claimants and so the assessments are crucial.

In the summer a charity - Dial UK - draw attention to inaccurate assessments and cases where doctors had written almost identical reports about completely different people with different conditions. Our disability issues reporter - Carolyn Atkinson - has been finding out if the situation has improved six months on.

DAVIES

He asked me if I could walk and how far I could walk. He asked me if I could bend. I told him no. He asked me about getting in and out of the bath - I hadn't had a bath for over 12 years.

ATKINSON

Former marine engineer Chris Davies is severely disabled after an accident at work. He can barely walk, uses a stick and other mobility aids and can't bend after an operation to put metal rods in his back. He had to go to appeal to reinstate the £180 a month of disability living allowance taken away from him as a result of a bad assessment.

DAVIES

When he had written up his report, after leaving the house, he stated I could bend and touch my toes, I had full flexibility of the upper part of my body, I could walk up to a kilometre, I didn't limp, I didn't use any aids at all while moving around. According to him I could be a tiller girl - I could raise my legs that high. I should be so lucky.

ATKINSON

Chris Davies won his appeal two years ago when a company called Sema employed doctors to do the assessments. Sema was then taken over by SchlumbergerSema in April 2001. But disability campaigners say the problems are still continuing. Sandy Kelland Rosser runs Dial UK's Swansea office.

ROSSER

We have one doctor who thinks that he can tell how far you can walk based on whether or not you've got hard skin on your feet. So as far as he's concerned if you've got hard skin on your feet you can walk between one and four kilometres. He can also judge whether or not you use a walking stick or crutches, just by looking at your hands and saying oh well there's no hard skin on your hands so therefore you don't use a walking stick or crutches. You can't say a person can walk if the person's

never got up and walked, you can't say somebody's blood pressure is whatever if you haven't taken it.

ATKINSON

Sandy Kelland Rosser says hundreds of disabled people are continuing to lose money because of mistakes in their medical assessments. Over the past 18 months Dial UK in Swansea alone has taken more than a 150 cases to appeal and won 95 per cent of them.

ROSSER

It's dreadfully distressing for them, it is affecting people's lives dreadfully. I mean these people they've been getting benefit and all of a sudden it stops. My office has to take these people to appeal in order to get that money back and this goes on every day of the week. It's just - it's wrong - it's outrageous.

ATKINSON

SchlumbergerSema is contracted by the Department of Work and Pensions. Two and a half thousand of their doctors are paid between £45 and £105 per patient visit, another 200 are salaried members of staff. Unlike in the past when they were invited to apply to do the job now any doctor can put themselves forward. Since SchlumbergerSema took over Sema the work and pensions select committee has been keeping an eye on it. Dr Peter Holden, from the British Medical Association, which represents doctors says the system is not working for either claimants or medics.

HOLDEN

The whole of the benefits assessment procedure medically has been a disaster area since 1992. It was a disaster area with the Benefits Agency, it was a disaster area with the Benefits Agency medical services, it was a disaster area with Sema and it's now a disaster area with S2 - SchlumbergerSema. And the problem is this: the whole business is completely under resourced in terms of the doctor time required to produce a proper full report. The antics of the various authorities who've been responsible for running this have driven away the experienced doctors from the work and they are left with insufficient doctors with insufficient time budgeted to do the job properly. It's time politicians came clean. None of this is going to come right until the politicians come clean, none of this is going to come right until the contract is properly resourced in terms of time and that is going to mean cash because it is not the sort of work that doctors are falling over themselves to do.

SMITH

Dr Peter Holden ending that report by Carolyn Atkinson. We contacted the minister for work and pensions, Nick Brown and SchlumbergerSema - both declined our request for an interview but SchlumbergerSema did send us this statement. In it the company says that: "In view of confidentiality considerations we do not comment on individual doctors or individual cases." They say: "We're constantly striving to improve the quality of the medical reports produced by our