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The Rt Hon Frank Field MP  
Chair of the Work and Pensions Select Committee  
14 Tothill Street  
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3<sup>rd</sup> February 2016

Thank you for your enquiry following up my evidence to your Committee on 28 October 2015. You asked specifically about the Department collecting data on any correlation between the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and suicide, self-harm and mental health conditions; and why the Department disputes the figures and conclusions of the report "First Do No Harm".

The Department does not collect data on or record the reasons for deaths of benefit claimants. Collecting cause of death information would involve considerable additional data collection from individuals, the Office of National Statistics and the Department of Health, incurring resource expense and imposing burdens on registrars and coroners. Given the widely acknowledged difficulty in identifying the causes of suicide it is unlikely that attempting to collect this data would be justifiable or proportionate.

Turning to the "First Do No Harm" report, although the Department does not dispute the raw figures, it is impossible to demonstrate causation from this type of analysis; this is widely accepted by academics and analysts. It is unfortunate that, although the authors stated explicitly that they could not establish a causal link between the WCA and increases in suicide, self-harm and adverse mental health, this was not reported by the media and others. In addition, it is concerning that there was no evidence that the people with mental health problems highlighted in the report even underwent a Work Capability Assessment.

For the record, I should point out that in the Hansard references cited in your letter the Minister for Employment did not say that the report's findings and figures were "completely incorrect" she merely pointed out that this data should not be applied to a discussion of sanctions, and said she did not agree with the claims made in the report.

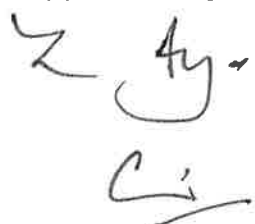
I would like to reassure you that the Department takes its duty of care to claimants seriously.

There is much evidence that being in work can promote and protect health, and can help reverse the harmful effects of long-term unemployment or prolonged sickness absence. There is growing body of evidence which shows that generally work is good for health and being out of work can cause negative outcomes particularly on mental health as well as physical health.

The WCA was introduced in 2008 by the last Labour Government. We believe the principles of the assessment are right, but the system we inherited did not function as it should have. That is why we conducted five independent reviews of the WCA, implementing over 100 recommendations to make the process more valuable and robust; and improve the process and effectiveness on those with mental health conditions.

It is essential that the WCA accurately assesses the capability of people with conditions affecting mental function and the Department has made considerable efforts to ensure that the needs of persons with mental health conditions are met as part of the assessment process. Whilst we recognise that attending any assessment can be a stressful experience, we believe it is important to reassess claimants at appropriate intervals.

This ensures claimants are kept in touch with the Department and their benefit entitlement is correct, as health conditions and the impact on capacity to work can change. Building on the findings of independent reviews, we have introduced a number of improvements to the WCA process in recent years. This includes increasing the number of health professionals who specialise in mental health, improving training for decision makers to ensure they have sufficient knowledge and understanding of mental health conditions, and the introduction of a telephone support service to help claimants complete their ESA50 health questionnaire. Improvements such as these have made it easier for people with mental health conditions to receive appropriate support through the welfare system.



**The Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP**

**SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS**

*NB: There are some out there in the media and social media who have used our figures to cause the sort of outrageous action. I would hope that the committee would not seek to follow suit. I note that being introduced the ESA and the WCA, the Labour party now seeks to attack it as though they had nothing to do with it. Surely the committee should seek to recognise the good intent of those engaged in this difficult area.*