

Where's the benefit?

by Denis Joe

This week sees the next stage of welfare reform, to be known as the **Universal Credit Scheme**, that are going to leave claimants financially worse off. Reading the headlines and listening to announcers on TV news, one would have thought that the day of the Apocalypse was seriously upon us. Church leaders met with Members of the Legislative Assembly in Northern Ireland stating that the reforms have created an '

[absolute fear](#)

' amongst congregations. A £1m Foodbank appeal has been launched by the **Trussell Trust**

with claims that nearly 5 million people already live '

[in food poverty in the UK](#)

'. Whilst exaggeration has been a major feature of welfare reform in the past there does seem to be something different.

Some of these reforms have already been introduced. Reassessment of eligibility to the new benefit, **Employment Support Allowance** (brought in to replace Incapacity Benefit), drew reaction and protest from many charities, and newspaper columnists, saying that this was an attack on the living standards of a million and a half disabled people. One of the major changes means that a GP assessment of a person's health is no longer valid. The healthcare group

ATOS

were contracted to carry out

[Work Capability Assessments](#)

, introduced by the Labour government in 2008.

Of course there have been many horror stories, and ATOS have not proved altogether competent in their assessments. There may be some justification in thinking that they saw their role as getting people off sick benefits rather than assessing them. Yet criticism of the tests miss a very important point. Shaun Williams, director of corporate affairs at Leonard Cheshire Disability, said: "[The new test for employment support allowance is much tougher than the previous test for incapacity benefit, so it is no surprise that more people are being found eligible for work](#)". But it makes sense that a person should be gauged on their ability to work and not on whether they are sick or not. Many people in wheelchairs, amputees, are able to and capable of holding down a job. There are currently 1.3 million disabled people in the UK who are available for and want to work ([Office for National Statistics - Labour Force Survey, Jan - March 2009](#))

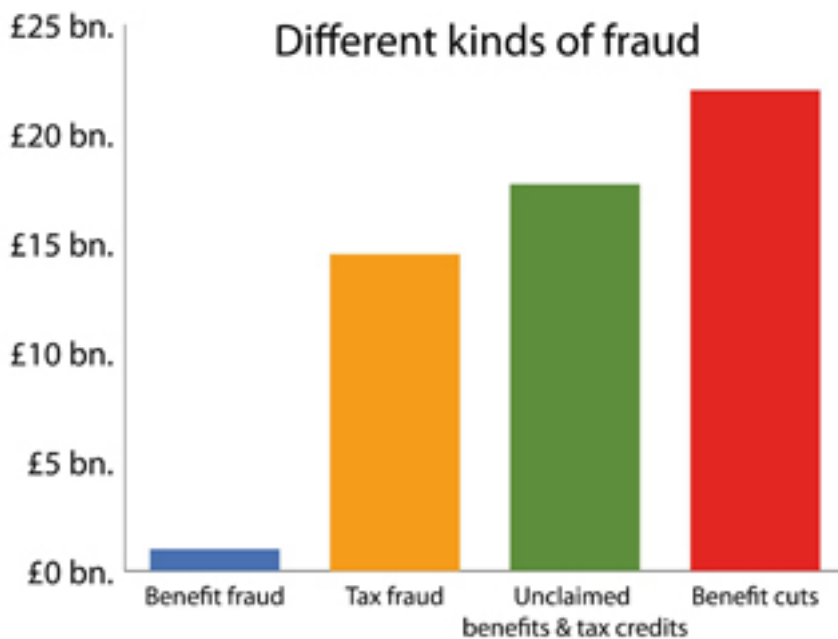
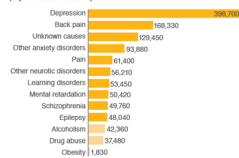
. Yet, as the chart shows, the top ten reasons for claiming benefits are mental illness. Over the past decade or so diagnose of depression has undergone a transformation, with headlines reaching hysterical proportion. There seemed to be an ecstatic reporting of stories such as research which revealed that 38 per cent of Europeans are suffering from a mental disorder – that's about 165million people (see '

[Blaming Big Pharma for society's ills](#)

').

And why should people be deemed to be incapable of work because of a lifestyle such as alcoholism or drug addiction?

Most common illnesses cited in benefit claims
(top ten and selected)



[Daniel J. Mitchell](#)