

BRB No. 05-0237 BLA

WINTON VALLANCE	)	
	)	
Claimant-Petitioner	)	
	)	
v.	)	
	)	
H & W COAL COMPANY,	)	
INCORPORATED	)	
	)	DATE ISSUED: 09/19/2005
Employer-Respondent	)	
	)	
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF WORKERS'	)	
COMPENSATION PROGRAMS, UNITED	)	
STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR	)	
	)	
Party-in-Interest	)	DECISION and ORDER

Appeal of the Decision and Order of Rudolf L. Jansen, Administrative Law Judge, United States Department of Labor.

Edmond Collett (Edmond Collett, P.S.C.), Hyden, Kentucky, for claimant.

H. Brett Stonecipher (Ferreri & Fogle), Lexington, Kentucky, for employer.

Sarah M. Hurley (Howard M. Radzely, Solicitor of Labor; Donald S. Shire, Associate Solicitor; Rae Ellen Frank James, Deputy Associate Solicitor; Michael J. Rutledge, Counsel for Administrative Litigation and Legal Advice), Washington, D.C., for the Director, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs, United States Department of Labor.

Before: DOLDER, Chief Administrative Appeals Judge, HALL and BOGGS, Administrative Appeals Judges.

PER CURIAM:

Claimant appeals the Decision and Order (03-BLA-6127) of Administrative Law Judge Rudolf L. Jansen denying benefits on a claim filed pursuant to the provisions of Title IV of the Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969, as amended, 30 U.S.C. §901 *et seq.* (the Act). The administrative law judge found sixteen years of coal mine

employment pursuant to the parties' stipulation.<sup>1</sup> Decision and Order at 4; Hearing Transcript at 27. Based on the date of filing, the administrative law judge adjudicated the claim pursuant to 20 C.F.R. Part 718. Decision and Order at 7-8. After determining that this claim is a subsequent claim,<sup>2</sup> the administrative law judge noted the proper standard and found that the newly submitted evidence was insufficient to establish either the existence of pneumoconiosis or a totally disabling respiratory or pulmonary impairment pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §§718.202(a), 718.204(b)(2). Decision and Order at 4, 8-13. Consequently, the administrative law judge concluded that claimant failed to establish any element of entitlement previously adjudicated against him and denied the subsequent claim pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §725.309(d). Decision and Order at 13. Accordingly, the administrative law judge denied benefits.

On appeal, claimant contends that the administrative law judge erred in failing to find the existence of pneumoconiosis established pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.202(a)(1) and in failing to find total disability established pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.204(b)(2)(iv). Claimant also asserts that he was not provided a complete pulmonary evaluation as required by the Act and regulations. Employer responds, urging affirmance of the administrative law judge's denial of benefits. The Director, Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (the Director), has filed a letter indicating that he will not respond on the merits of the appeal but asserting that claimant has been provided with a complete pulmonary examination.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This case arises within the jurisdiction of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit as claimant was last employed in the coal mine industry in Kentucky. *See Shupe v. Director, OWCP*, 12 BLR 1-200 (1989)(*en banc*); Director's Exhibits 1, 2, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Claimant filed his initial claim for benefits on May 1, 1973, which was finally denied by the Department of Labor on August 6, 1980 because claimant failed to establish any element of entitlement. Director's Exhibit 1. Claimant filed a second claim for benefits on September 4, 1996, which was denied on June 18, 1992 because claimant failed to establish either the existence of pneumoconiosis or a totally disabling respiratory or pulmonary impairment. Director's Exhibit 2. Claimant filed this claim on October 22, 2001, which was denied by the district director on April 14, 2003. Director's Exhibits 4, 27. Claimant subsequently requested a hearing before the Office of Administrative Law Judges. Director's Exhibit 30.

<sup>3</sup> The administrative law judge's length of coal mine employment determination, as well as his findings pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §§718.202(a)(2)-(3) and 718.204(b)(2)(i)-(iii), are affirmed as unchallenged on appeal. *Skrack v. Island Creek Coal Co.*, 6 BLR 1-710 (1983).

The Board's scope of review is defined by statute. The administrative law judge's Decision and Order must be affirmed if it is rational, supported by substantial evidence, and in accordance with applicable law. 33 U.S.C. §921(b)(3), as incorporated by 30 U.S.C. §932(a); *O'Keeffe v. Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates, Inc.*, 380 U.S. 359 (1965).

In order to establish entitlement to benefits in a living miner's claim filed pursuant to 20 C.F.R. Part 718, claimant must establish the existence of pneumoconiosis, that the pneumoconiosis arose out of coal mine employment, and that the pneumoconiosis is totally disabling. 20 C.F.R. §§718.3, 718.202, 718.203, 718.204; *Gee v. W.G. Moore and Sons*, 9 BLR 1-4 (1986)(*en banc*). Failure to establish any one of these elements precludes entitlement. *Trent v. Director, OWCP*, 11 BLR 1-26 (1987); *Perry v. Director, OWCP*, 9 BLR 1-1 (1986)(*en banc*).

Where a miner files a claim for benefits more than one year after the final denial of a previous claim, the subsequent claim must also be denied unless the administrative law judge finds that "one of the applicable conditions of entitlement . . . has changed since the date upon which the order denying the prior claim became final." 20 C.F.R. §725.309(d); *White v. New White Coal Co., Inc.*, 23 BLR 1-1, 1-3 (2004). The "applicable conditions of entitlement" are "those conditions upon which the prior denial was based." 20 C.F.R. §725.309(d)(2). Claimant's prior claim was denied because he failed to establish either the existence of pneumoconiosis or that he was totally disabled by a respiratory or pulmonary impairment. Director's Exhibit 2. Consequently, claimant had to submit new evidence establishing either of these elements to proceed with his claim. 20 C.F.R. §725.309(d)(2), (3); *see also Sharondale Corp. v. Ross*, 42 F.3d 993, 19 BLR 2-10 (6th Cir. 1994)(holding under the former provision that claimant must establish, with qualitatively different evidence, at least one element of entitlement previously adjudicated against him).

Pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.202(a)(1), the administrative law judge considered the four<sup>4</sup> readings of two new x-rays in light of the readers' radiological qualifications. Decision and Order at 9. Only one reading was positive for pneumoconiosis, a "1/0" reading of the November 29, 2001 x-ray by Dr. Simpao, who has no specialized qualifications for the interpretation of x-rays. Director's Exhibit 12. Taking into account that the November 29, 2001 x-ray was read as negative for the existence of pneumoconiosis by Dr. Broudy, a B-reader, the administrative law judge found that the November 29, 2001 x-ray was negative for pneumoconiosis. Because all of the other readings were negative, the administrative law judge found that claimant did not establish

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Sargent evaluated the November 29, 2001 x-ray for quality purposes only. Director's Exhibit 12.

the existence of pneumoconiosis by a preponderance of the x-ray evidence. Decision and Order at 9. The administrative law judge conducted a proper qualitative analysis of the conflicting x-ray readings. See *Staton v. Norfolk & Western Ry. Co.*, 65 F.3d 55, 19 BLR 2-271 (6th Cir. 1995); *Woodward v. Director, OWCP*, 991 F.2d 314, 17 BLR 2-77 (6th Cir. 1993). Consequently, claimant's arguments that the administrative law judge improperly relied on the readers' credentials, merely counted the negative readings, and "may have 'selectively analyzed'" the readings, lack merit. Claimant's Brief at 3. We therefore affirm the administrative law judge's finding pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.202(a)(1).

Pursuant to Section 718.202(a)(4), the administrative law judge found that the weight of the better documented and reasoned medical opinion evidence did not establish the existence of pneumoconiosis. Decision and Order 10-11. Claimant does not challenge this finding. It is therefore affirmed. *Skrack v. Island Creek Coal Co.*, 6 BLR 1-710 (1983).

Pursuant to Section 718.204(b)(2)(iv), claimant initially asserts that in addressing the issue of total disability, the administrative law judge is required to consider the exertional requirements of claimant's usual coal mine work in conjunction with a physician's findings regarding the extent of any respiratory impairment. Claimant's Brief at 5, citing *Cornett v. Benham Coal, Inc.*, 227 F.3d 569, 22 BLR 2-107 (6th Cir. 2000); *Hvizdzak v. North American Coal Corp.*, 7 BLR 1-469 (1984); *Parsons v. Black Diamond Coal Co.*, 7 BLR 1-236 (1984). The only specific argument claimant sets forth, however, is that:

The claimant's usual coal mine work included being a dozer operator . . . . It can be reasonably concluded that such duties involved the claimant being exposed to heavy concentrations of dust on a daily basis. Taking into consideration the claimant's condition against such duties, it is rational to conclude that the claimant's condition prevents him from engaging in his usual employment in that such employment occurred in a dusty environment and involved exposure to dust on a daily basis.

Claimant's Brief at 5. Claimant's argument is without merit. A statement that a miner should limit further exposure to coal dust is not equivalent to a finding of total disability.<sup>5</sup> *Zimmerman v. Director, OWCP*, 871 F.2d 564, 12 BLR 2-254 (6th Cir. 1989); *Taylor v. Evans and Gamble Co.*, 12 BLR 1-83 (1988).

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<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the administrative law judge accorded greater weight to Dr. Broudy's opinion that there is no evidence that claimant has any pulmonary disease or respiratory impairment. Decision and Order at 13; Director's Exhibit 13.

Further, contrary to claimant's argument, the administrative law judge was not required to consider claimant's age, education, and work experience in determining whether claimant is totally disabled. These factors "are not relevant to the issue of the existence of a respiratory impairment pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.204(b)(2)(iv)." *White*, 23 BLR at 1-6-7. We also reject claimant's argument that pneumoconiosis is a progressive disease that must have worsened, thus affecting his ability to perform his usual coal mine employment, because an administrative law judge's findings must be based solely on the medical evidence of record. *White*, 23 BLR at 1-7 n.8. Therefore, we affirm the administrative law judge's finding that claimant did not establish that he is totally disabled pursuant to 20 C.F.R. §718.204(b)(2)(iv).

Finally, claimant contends that because the administrative law judge did not fully credit Dr. Simpao's November 29, 2001 opinion provided by the Department of Labor, "the Director has failed to provide the claimant with a complete, credible pulmonary evaluation sufficient to substantiate the claim, as required under the Act." Claimant's Brief at 4. The Director responds that "Section 413(b) requires the Director to provide the claimant with a complete and credible examination, not a dispositive one," and states that claimant has been provided the complete and credible pulmonary evaluation required by the Act and regulations. Director's Brief at 3-4.

The Act requires that "[e]ach miner who files a claim . . . be provided an opportunity to substantiate his or her claim by means of a complete pulmonary evaluation." 30 U.S.C. §923(b), implemented by 20 C.F.R. §§718.101(a), 725.406. The issue of whether the Director has met this duty may arise where "the administrative law judge finds a medical opinion incomplete," or where "the administrative law judge finds that the opinion, although complete, lacks credibility." *Hodges v. BethEnergy Mines, Inc.*, 18 BLR 1-84, 1-88 n.3 (1994); *see also Newman v. Director, OWCP*, 745 F. 2d 1162, 7 BLR 2-25 (8th Cir. 1984).

The record reflects that Dr. Simpao conducted an examination and the full range of testing required by the regulations, and addressed each element of entitlement on the Department of Labor examination form. 20 C.F.R. §§718.101(a), 718.104, 725.406(a); Director's Exhibit 11. The administrative law judge did not find nor does claimant allege that Dr. Simpao's report was incomplete. The administrative law judge chose to give less weight to Dr. Simpao's opinion regarding the existence of pneumoconiosis and total disability because he did not find it as well reasoned and documented as the contrary opinion by Dr. Broudy, but he did not find that it lacked credibility. Decision and Order at 10-13; *see Gray v. SLC Coal Co.*, 176 F.3d 382, 388, 21 BLR 2-615, 2-626 (6th Cir. 1999)(explaining that "ALJ's may evaluate the relative merits of conflicting physicians' opinions and choose to credit one . . . over the other"). Because Dr. Simpao's report was complete and the administrative law judge did not find that it lacked credibility, there is no merit to claimant's argument that the Director failed to fulfill his statutory obligation

to provide claimant with a complete and credible pulmonary evaluation. *See Hodges*, 18 BLR at 1-88 n.3.

Because claimant has failed to establish any element of entitlement that was previously adjudicated against him, we affirm the administrative law judge's denial of benefits pursuant to Section 725.309(d). *See* 20 C.F.R. §725.309(d)(2); *White*, 23 BLR at 1-3.

Accordingly, the administrative law judge's Decision and Order denying benefits is affirmed.

SO ORDERED.

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NANCY S. DOLDER, Chief  
Administrative Appeals Judge

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BETTY JEAN HALL  
Administrative Appeals Judge

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JUDITH S. BOGGS  
Administrative Appeals Judge