

Why are so many people in Britain off sick? The answer is far more complex than you think

Gaby Hinsliff, The Guardian, Fri 27 Sep 2024

Jamie used to love his job. Working as a hospital porter, helping sick people in need. At 50, he was still fit and healthy. But then he strained his back at work, and so began a long, downhill slide. He was given physio exercises to follow online, but couldn't access them, and before long he was in such pain he was signed off work for good. Unable to keep active, and putting on weight, Jamie was referred to a diabetes prevention programme; but by now his back hurt too much to drive to the clinic, and public transport was a struggle. Overwhelmed and isolated, he ended up retreating inside his damp, mouldy council house. Five years on, Jamie still isn't working, but his back is almost the least of his problems. He's diabetic, asthmatic thanks to the mould, and suffering from coronary heart disease.

There are countless Jamies out there, many suffering from what some doctors privately call "shit life syndrome": getting dealt a string of bad cards, lacking the money to bounce back, and sinking deeper. They're genuinely sick, often with multiple diagnoses, but sick in a particularly complex, tangled way that medicine alone can't magically solve. And herein lies this autumn's toughest political battleground, as a new Labour government attempts to kickstart economic growth by getting people who are long-term sick back to work.

These are worrying times for many people living on disability and sickness benefits. Keir Starmer's warning in Liverpool that those who can work should have done little to quell anxious speculation about what this autumn's budget means for welfare spending, especially as ministers have yet to spell out exactly what they'll do about planned disability benefit reforms set in train by the outgoing Tory government. Starmer has stressed that he knows there will be "hard cases", who physically can't work no matter how much they try, and that Labour wants to help rather than force people back into jobs. But it's difficult to relax when the roads to previous welfare crackdowns have been paved too often with reassuring words.

Enter Jamie, who isn't a real person, but a representative example of countless very real patients devised by the NHS Confederation to illustrate its report on a more benign way to get half a million long-term sick Britons back to work. The analysis skilfully separates tabloid myths about skivers and sicknotes from hard facts. Yes, Britain has 2.8 million adults economically inactive because of long-term illness, up by a startling 900,000 since 2020. No, this isn't some unavoidable global hangover from the pandemic, but it's also extremely unlikely to be because a life on welfare is just too cushy here. The introduction of universal credit, if anything, left many disabled people worse off than before.

The simple explanation is that Britons as a whole are sicker than we used to be, with a third of working-age adults admitting to at least one health condition. Economic inactivity is in some ways a canary down the mine, pointing to lives that are making too many people stressed and ill. Tellingly, the report concludes that the kind of social factors that so often underpin "shit life syndrome" explain more of the variation in health outcomes between different parts of the country than more obvious factors such as diet and exercise.

But it also shows how little it would have taken to halt Jamie's downward slide; how different things might have been if he'd been offered the chance to retrain for a desk job, or cheap transport to his various appointments, or a better roof over his head. The message is that getting sick people fit for work again requires the whole of government uniting around a common purpose to reach the parts doctors can't.

There are reasons to be hopeful that ministers broadly get that. But the NHS Confederation's hopes of creating a virtuous circle – where upfront spending to improve the nation's health ultimately leads to lower welfare and healthcare bills, freeing up billions for everything else – requires something bolder than a "Treasury says no" approach focused stubbornly on upfront savings. There must be money to match good intentions, or Labour risks making already tough lives still tougher.