

Thousands died within weeks of losing their sickness benefit

By Peter Dominiczak
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THOUSANDS of welfare claimants have died within weeks of being declared "fit for work" and taken off sickness benefits, government figures show.

Campaigners called for an urgent inquiry after statistics released by the Department for Work and Pensions disclosed that 2,380 people died between December 2011 and February 2014, shortly after a work capability assessment declared them able to work.

The department, which was ordered by the data watchdog to publish the statistics, insisted "no causal link" could be drawn between benefits status and the likelihood of dying, as the causes of death were not recorded.

Officials insisted the overall mortality rate for people on out-of-work benefits, and specifically sickness and disability benefits, had fallen in the past decade in line with the rest of the population. Of the 2,380 people, 1,340 died after appealing against their assessments. It is not known what proportion of those appeals failed. The figures were released under freedom of information laws.

A source close to Iain Duncan Smith, the Work and Pensions Secretary, said: "This is a sensitive and complex issue and the reality is the mortality rate for people who have died while claiming an out-of-work benefit has fallen over a 10-year-period."

Andy Burnham, one of the Labour leadership candidates, said that they were "shocking figures that for the first time show the human cost of this Government's punishing benefits regime".

Rob Holland, of Mencap, said: "These tragic figures are concerning and warrant further investigation."

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