The Molecule and the Myth

Clozapine, Fear, and Data in Psychiatry

by

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2026

Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-751-2
ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-752-9

Dedication

To my patients,

whose clinical trajectories revealed—more clearly than any trial or guideline—that real-world evidence begins with a single human life, and that the physiology of suffering often teaches what statistics cannot.

To the families who endured the uncertainties of treatment-resistant illness, reminding me that every clinical decision is a hypothesis tested in circumstances far more complex than any controlled environment.

To the clinicians and researchers who refused to accept inherited dogma, and who insisted that risk must be understood through mechanisms, not mythology; through data, not memory; through physiology, not fear.

To those who contributed to global pharmacovigilance systems—anonymously, persistently, and without acclaim— allowing the silent patterns in millions of reports.

To correct the assumptions of a field that too often trusted intuition over evidence.

And to María,

whose own discipline as a physician—unwavering, exacting, and profoundly responsible — has been a constant reminder that

scientific rigor is not an abstraction but a daily practice of integrity, perseverance, and care.

Acknowledgments

Some books are written in solitude; others exist only because many unseen hands held them in place. This one belongs firmly to the second category.

My first debt of gratitude is to **José de León**, whose partnership began almost accidentally and evolved into a shared intellectual undertaking far larger than either of us could have anticipated. Nothing in these pages would have taken shape without his clarity of thought, his useful distrust of convenient explanations, and his unwavering instinct that physiology always deserves a second look. For more than a decade, his way of thinking nudged mine toward angles I would never have discovered alone.

To **Emilio Sanz**, whose quiet but decisive presence in my academic life opened the door to the world of pharmacovigilance. He taught me that medicines do not reveal their truths in clinical trials, but in the disorder and complexity of real life—and that listening to that global murmur requires rigor, patience, and humility. Without that initiation, this book would simply not exist.

To the colleagues, residents, and students who kept alive the conversations about what we believe we know and what we must be willing to reconsider. Their questions, hesitations, and small acts of intellectual rebellion contributed more to this project than any database could.

To my patients—also to those who are no longer here—who bore the consequences of a profession suspended between fear and

evidence. Their trajectories, often marked by suffering that should never have been inevitable, are the quiet moral center of this book.

To my family, whose presence offered steadiness during the long years in which clozapine became not just a molecule I studied, but a lens through which I came to understand the profession itself. Their patience allowed me to finish what often felt like an unfinished conversation with the field.

Finally, to the readers who approach this book with curiosity, skepticism, or hope: may these pages offer not certainty, but clarity—and perhaps the beginning of a different way of seeing a molecule that psychiatry feared long before it tried to understand it.

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Author's Note

This book was not written to settle a controversy, defend a molecule, or correct a historical misunderstanding—although it inevitably touches all three. Its purpose is simpler and, I hope, more useful: to examine how fear, evidence, and clinical practice diverged around one of the most effective and most misunderstood treatments in psychiatry.

For more than three decades, clozapine has occupied a paradoxical place in our profession: indispensable yet distrusted, uniquely effective yet chronically underused, scientifically fascinating yet burdened by a mythology born from a single tragic episode. The distance between what the molecule does and what the profession believes it does has shaped countless clinical trajectories, many of them far more painful than necessary.

This book attempts to understand that distance.

It draws on physiology, pharmacovigilance, clinical observation, and the global patterns contained in VigiBase—not to offer certainty, but to illuminate the coherence behind risks that long seemed erratic, and to reconsider the assumptions that turned caution into culture. Much of what follows arises from years of collaborative work examining how medicines behave outside controlled trials, where biology meets vulnerability and where real-world outcomes often challenge inherited dogma.

Although the narrative begins with the personal, it is not a memoir. And although it ends with a technical appendix, it is not a manual.

It is an attempt to weave together decades of scientific inquiry with the human realities that motivated it—patients waiting too long for the only treatment likely to change their lives, clinicians navigating the moral weight of uncertainty, and a profession learning, slowly and sometimes reluctantly, to re-align its fears with its evidence.

If the chapters that follow seem, at times, to move between chemistry, history, psychology, and clinical practice, it is because clozapine has always lived at their intersection. Understanding its story requires stepping into the places where data challenges memory and where physiology disrupts intuition. My hope is that this book helps illuminate that crossing point—and that readers, whether clinicians, researchers, or simply curious observers, may find in these pages a clearer view of a molecule that psychiatry feared long before it tried to understand it.

Prologue — The Accidental Beginning

An academic competition, a failed convergence, and the origin of an unexpected scientific partnership

Some scientific partnerships begin with a shared interest.

Ours began with a competition that produced no winner—and with a molecule that refused to behave.

In the early 2000s, two Spanish psychiatrists who had never shaken hands found themselves preparing for the same ordeal: the national examination for accreditation as "*catedrático*", Full Professor of Psychiatry, held that year in Bilbao. It was a peculiar ritual of Spanish academia—half scientific contest, half bureaucratic rite—where preparation mattered, but so did the unspoken currents of the system.

José de León flew in from Kentucky armed with the efficiency of someone who had spent years navigating the American academic machinery. His curriculum was impeccable; his trajectory, inevitable. He passed, as expected.

I did not. My path to that title would take several more years, forged slowly from the peculiar paradoxes of the Spanish university system—a place where effort was necessary, but never sufficient.

That should have been the end of the story. A brief crossing of parallel lines that immediately diverged again.

But academia, like biology, is structured by detours. Spain certified José as a Full Professor — and then failed to offer him any position in which to use that title. He returned to Kentucky. The system moved on, without noticing that something unusual had been set in motion.

From Tenerife, I watched that moment with a mixture of admiration and bewilderment. The lesson was an early one: merit and opportunity often live in separate worlds, and academia is not always designed to bring them together.

Only with time did we realize that the dead end was actually a beginning.

A few months later, José began sending me his papers—an old-fashioned gesture that felt almost like the exchange of letters between scientists in another century. I replied with my own work on patient empowerment, adherence, and the psychological architecture behind pharmacotherapy. What started as professional courtesy grew into a conversation, and the conversation into a friendship.

Somewhere in that early correspondence, he became an anonymous reviewer for a manuscript I had submitted to the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. When the paper was accepted, he revealed his identity with a smile in his tone. The revelation didn't jeopardize the review process; if anything, it added a conspiratorial pleasure to the collaboration. Academia had given us no position in which to meet—so we invented our own.

Then came the invitation that set everything in motion: José suggested writing an editorial together for *Psychotherapy and*

Psychosomatics titled *"Reviving Research on Medication Attitudes for Improving Pharmacotherapy."* I said yes without hesitation. That single yes created a research line neither of us had foreseen.

We wrote about beliefs, adherence, internal locus of control, pharmacophobia, and the subtle psychological forces that operate between a prescription and a swallowed pill. We questioned assumptions the field still treated as immutable. We asked whether treatment failure was sometimes less about the molecule and more about how the molecule was proposed, explained, feared, or misunderstood.

It was during those years that I began reading José's work on clozapine more carefully.

The molecule was already a paradox: uniquely effective, chronically feared, massively underused, perpetually entangled in a mythology that seemed resistant to the very evidence meant to guide clinical practice. Our interests—his in pharmacogenetics and treatment-resistant schizophrenia, mine in real-world practice and patient behaviour —aligned almost too perfectly. Clozapine sat at the intersection.

One day I suggested, almost casually, that we combine his clinical understanding with the world's largest safety database: VigiBase. Why not interrogate the molecule through the lens of global pharmacovigilance? Why not ask questions others had avoided, not because they were unimportant, but because they were inconvenient?

José did not hesitate. The idea became a plan, and the plan became a decade.

We had no sense then that this collaboration would grow into dozens of papers, several lines of inquiry, a sustained effort to reinterpret clozapine's risks, and a long-term attempt to separate physiology from fear. Nor could we have predicted the small absurdity that later followed: that the ScholarGPS system would rank José as the number one clozapine researcher in the world and me as number three.

We mention that ranking with amusement rather than pride. Rankings tell you who publishes; they do not tell you why. What matters is the reminder: what began with a failed professorship competition and a brief exchange of papers had become a mission—one aimed at understanding a molecule psychiatry had feared far more than it had understood.

What This Book Is — and Is Not

This book is not a memoir.

It is not a technical monograph.

It is the story of how two psychiatrists, shaped by different systems and continents, tried to reconcile fear and evidence, tradition and data, mythology and physiology.

It is also the story of patients whose lives were shaped—sometimes saved, sometimes lost—by decisions rooted not in science but in inherited fear.

And it begins, improbably enough, not with a clinical crisis or a laboratory breakthrough, but with two competing dossiers in

Bilbao—and the molecule that turned a professional coincidence into a scientific commitment.

To understand why clozapine became the most brilliant and most feared molecule in psychiatry, we must go back to its beginning—long before the panic, long before the mythology, long before its name became a warning.

A Threshold, Not an Ending

Before the panic had a name, clozapine's story belonged not to individual careers, but to a psychiatric era convinced that its pharmacological foundations were already secure.

But the story of clozapine cannot begin in Bilbao, nor in Kentucky, nor in the meeting of two psychiatrists who ended up chasing the same molecule from opposite sides of the Atlantic. Our beginning is merely the doorway through which we enter a much older narrative—one that had been unfolding for decades before either of us wrote a word about pharmacovigilance or adherence.

To understand clozapine's strange destiny, we must return to a time when psychiatry believed it understood antipsychotics, when dopamine was still king, when industry and science marched in comfortable synchrony, and when the field was convinced that the rules of psychopharmacology were finally stable.

Clozapine shattered those rules long before it saved a single life.

Before the panic had a name, before agranulocytosis became a ghost story whispered in corridors, before regulatory agencies turned caution into policy and policy into fear, the molecule

arrived quietly—almost innocently—into a psychiatric world that had no language for what it was about to encounter.

The history of clozapine is not just the history of a drug.

It is the history of a system caught unprepared.

A profession confronted with a compound that behaved differently, healed differently, and terrified differently.

And like all myths, clozapine's mythology did not emerge from its failures. It emerged from our inability to interpret its successes.

If the prologue explains how two careers converged on this molecule, **Chapter 1 explains how the molecule emerged in the first place**—how it startled a generation of clinicians, how it reshaped expectations about what an antipsychotic could be, and how the seeds of fear were planted long before anyone spoke of myocarditis, pneumonia, or inflammatory storms.

To understand what clozapine became, we must begin where psychiatry first met it: **in the laboratories, trials, and missteps that preceded the panic.**

Now the story widens—into the chemical, the historical, and the human.

Turn the page.

Part I — Origins, Panic, and Mythmaking

The Four Ages of Clozapine

A conceptual timeline showing the historical shifts in perception, evidence, and clinical use.

Chapter 1
The Birth of a Misunderstood Molecule

How a compound synthesized in a quiet Swiss laboratory became psychiatry's most brilliant misfit

In 1957, inside the discreet geometry of a Sandoz laboratory in Basel, a chemist synthesized a molecule that would spend the next half-century refusing to follow instructions.

Clozapine did not break the laws of chemistry.

It broke the unwritten laws of psychiatry: the silent expectations about how an antipsychotic should behave, what side effects it should produce, and how clinicians were supposed to feel when they prescribed it. It was a breach not of science, but of doctrine.

At the time, the field lived inside a tidy conceptual box. Antipsychotics were expected to:

- block dopamine receptors,
- flatten affect,
- induce rigidity and tremor,
- tame hallucinations by dulling the body as much as the mind.

These expectations were so deeply internalised that they became invisible—less a theory than a professional instinct.

A drug without extrapyramidal symptoms was not a breakthrough—it was a threat to the prevailing theory.

Clozapine understood none of this.

The Heresy

Early animal studies raised eyebrows and unsettled assumptions. Clozapine reduced psychotic behaviours but stubbornly refused to produce the neuromotor abnormalities that had come to define antipsychotic action. The absence of rigidity was interpreted not as refinement, but as dishonesty. Something that worked *too well*—or too gently—was automatically suspicious.

Psychiatric culture had, by then, fused suffering with efficacy. A drug that did not punish the body was viewed as incomplete, unserious, perhaps even fraudulent. The paradox ran deep: clinicians trusted antipsychotics *because* they produced adverse effects, not despite them.

Across the 1960s, evidence accumulated quietly across Central Europe:

Patients improved.

They improved substantially.

And they improved without neurological injury.

This was not innovation. For many, it was provocation.

Hans Hippius, one of the era's most perceptive European psychiatrists, grasped the significance early. If a molecule worked,

why insist it resemble haloperidol to be taken seriously? Clozapine called the field's bluff. It exposed how deeply psychiatry had confused tradition with truth.

A Molecule with Too Much Personality

From the moment of its synthesis, clozapine followed a narrative arc that, in retrospect, looks deliberate—yet at the time felt disorienting:

1. **1957** — Synthesis.
2. **Early 1960s** — Curiosity and confusion.
3. **Mid-1960s** — Rejection by traditionalists.
4. **Late 1960s** — Remarkable clinical success in Central Europe.
5. **Early 1970s** — Commercial launch by Sandoz.
6. **Hippius and others** — Persistent defenders of its potential.

Seen in sequence, this was not a chaotic trajectory, but a slow collision between an unconventional molecule and an inflexible profession.

Then came the fevers.

During rapid titration, some patients developed transient inflammatory spikes—brief, dramatic, and poorly understood. Today we recognize them as early manifestations of clozapine's immunomodulatory footprint and its links to metabolic activation through CYP1A2. In the 1970s, they were simply more fuel for the idea that this was a molecule with "too much personality," a drug that insisted on doing things its own way.

Clozapine behaved like a prodigy with a temper—brilliant, demanding, and impossible to categorize with the tools psychiatry then possessed.

1975 — The Fall

Then came the catastrophe.

In Finland, within a matter of weeks, sixteen cases of agranulocytosis appeared—eight of them fatal. The numbers were minuscule, but the psychological impact enormous. Psychiatry did not pause to investigate genetic clustering, local factors, or differential vulnerability.

It paused to panic.

Clozapine was withdrawn across Europe with a speed that revealed more about institutional fear than about science. Its name became radioactive. It entered psychiatric folklore not as a therapeutic breakthrough, but as a warning whispered to new trainees about humility and vigilance.

Fear travels faster than data.

And it settles deeper.

The tragedy in Finland became the defining story of the drug—emotionally coherent, scientifically incomplete, and devastatingly sticky.

Exile and Survival

Yet the molecule did not disappear.

A small group of clinicians—mostly in Germany, Austria, and parts of Switzerland—refused to let it die. They had seen transformations in patients other antipsychotics could not touch. They had watched hallucinations fade without catatonia, aggression soften without rigidity, despair lift without the motor cruelty of the dopamine-blockers.

They knew that one geographic cluster should not erase a decade of therapeutic success.

But psychiatry is a field that often prefers safety myths to complex truths. It was easier to exile clozapine than to build a nuanced risk-benefit framework. Easier to retreat than to understand.

By the early 1980s, clozapine was still used—but quietly, almost clandestinely, by clinicians who practiced a form of pharmacological civil disobedience. They treated patients in the shadows while the profession, publicly, chose simplicity over accuracy.

The Resurrection

Sandoz made a counterintuitive decision in 1982: instead of abandoning clozapine, they narrowed its use to the patients most forsaken by the psychiatric system—the ones who had failed every other treatment.

This was not a marketing pivot.

It was an ethical gamble.

The multicentre trial launched in 1984—what would later be known as the pivotal U.S. study—revealed what defenders of clozapine had long suspected: that for treatment-resistant schizophrenia, no other antipsychotic approached its efficacy.

In 1989, the U.S. FDA approved clozapine with unprecedented requirements:

- mandatory monitoring,
- controlled dispensing systems,
- a black box warning that functioned as both punishment and invitation.

Clozapine returned, but with visible scars.

It was welcomed back into psychiatry's house, but made to sleep in the attic—watched closely, forgiven conditionally, tolerated provisionally.

The Shadow That Would Not Lift

By the 1990s, the paradox was complete. Clozapine was:

- the most effective antipsychotic ever developed,
- with unmatched benefits for suicidality,
- capable of restoring lives that other treatments had abandoned,

It was also the most feared drug in psychiatry.

Not because the evidence justified the fear, but because the *memory* of risk had replaced the *analysis* of it.

Clozapine became the "last resort," the molecule clinicians used only when everything else had failed—and often long after patients had already lost years of life to therapeutic drift. Prescribing it was seen as bravery, recklessness, or both. A medical decision became a moral gesture.

And the irony was complete: the molecule that refused to behave was not the problem—it was the profession that refused to understand it.

Foreshadowing

Decades later, global pharmacovigilance would reveal a truth psychiatry had been reluctant to face:

- that clozapine's dangers were real but predictable,
- that its rare catastrophic risks had overshadowed its far more common life-saving benefits,
- and that the real harm lay not in its use, but in its avoidance.

This imbalance would become one of the central themes of modern clozapine pharmacovigilance.

But that part of the story belongs to later chapters.

For now, the tale ends in the late 1980s—with a molecule resurrected but not forgiven, brilliant yet burdened, indispensable yet distrusted, trapped in a reputation built less on data than on fear.

To understand how one tragic episode reshaped the global culture of prescribing, we must examine the moment when fear eclipsed reason—and psychiatry learned to distrust its own best drug.

When Fear Became the Framework

Clozapine's early story ends not with a verdict, but with a distortion.

A rare tragedy was elevated to universal truth, and psychiatry—already uneasy with uncertainty—chose to translate ambiguity into caution, and caution into prohibition. The molecule returned in the late 1980s, but it returned altered: no longer a therapeutic option, but a symbol of danger, a reminder of professional fallibility, a lesson wrapped in fear.

And fear, once institutionalized, rarely stays confined.

What happened after Finland was not simply a regulatory event. It was a psychological event. A cultural event. A moment when a profession collectively recalibrated its tolerance for risk—not on the basis of data, but on the basis of memory. The image of agranulocytosis, powerful and visceral, became the lens through which every aspect of clozapine was interpreted.

Inflammation looked like danger.

Fever looked like danger.

Sedation looked like danger.

Complexity itself looked like danger.

The molecule had not changed. The interpretive frame had.

As the 1990s unfolded, clozapine's clinical reality was increasingly overshadowed by its mythology. The profession began to speak of it in hushed tones, as if the drug carried not only medical risks but a kind of moral charge. Residents were taught to respect it, but also to fear it. Patients encountered it only after exhausting every other possibility—even when evidence suggested they should have begun there.

Fear had become a filter, a framework, a culture.

To understand how the most effective antipsychotic ever developed became psychiatry's most feared drug, we must look not at molecules or receptors, but at minds, institutions, and inherited narratives.

We must examine how fear reproduces itself across generations of clinicians, how rare harms overshadow common benefits, and how the psychology of risk can distort the practice of medicine more powerfully than any side effect.

Clozapine's biology explains its efficacy.

Its history explains its exile.

But only fear explains its mythology.

And so, the next chapter begins where science leaves off—in the emotional terrain where clinicians make decisions, where stories override statistics, and where a single tragedy can reshape an entire field's understanding of safety.

Turn the page.

The story now moves from chemistry and chronology to culture — from what clozapine is to why psychiatry learned to fear it.

Chapter 2
The Panic: How Psychiatry Became Afraid of Its Own Best Drug

A molecule's reputation ruined in a single season—and a profession reshaped for decades

By the mid-1970s, clozapine was already a peculiar success story. It worked better than expected, harmed patients less than expected, and seemed to belong to a future psychiatry had not yet imagined. And then, in 1975, everything collapsed.

Sixteen cases of agranulocytosis appeared in Finland. Eight patients died.

The number was small in epidemiological terms, but enormous in psychological ones. The event had all the ingredients of a professional trauma: sudden deaths, a "new" and poorly understood drug, and a sense that something catastrophic had slipped past the guards.

Professional dread works fast in medicine—much faster than evidence.

The field did not ask, *Why Finland? Why now? Why these patients?*

It asked a simpler, more primitive question: *Is clozapine safe?*

And when fear dictates the question, the answer is rarely nuanced.