What if there were a pill that made us more compassionate?

A refugee inflows into Europe accelerates and the drowning of men, women and children continues, the attitudes of many of those at the receiving end are hardening. What if there were a pill to make us more compassionate? Scientists claim there may be. Giving a drug that changes the neurochemical balance of the prefrontal cortex is associated with greater willingness to engage in pro-social behaviours such as ensuring resources are distributed more equally.

In a double-blind study, 35 participants, including 18 women, received tolcapone, a drug used in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease (it prolongs the effects of dopamine associated with reward and motivation in the prefrontal cortex), or placebo. They were asked to take a simple economic test, which involved dividing money between themselves and an anonymous recipient. When receiving tolcapone, the participants divided the money in a more fair and more egalitarian way than when they received placebo.

The authors suggest that fair-mindedness is not a stable personality trait and it can be affected by targeting specific neurochemical pathways in the brain. Consequently, studying basic scientific questions about human nature might provide insights into the diagnosis and treatment of social dysfunctions.