

## **"Mattress-stitches" for ears that protrude**

Doctor develops new, gentler operation method  
by Karl Friedrich Rommel

Statistics tell us that nearly every third German is dissatisfied with their protruding ears. But until recently, anyone who wanted to have the position of their ears corrected had to submit to a risky and painful procedure. The Konstanz ENT doctor Waldemar-Heinz Merck has developed a gentler method that puts an end to this.

"Since I was a child, I've worn my hair long," says Claudia Meyer. The 24-year-old clerical assistant from Essen looks good, but only her best friends have seen her ears: she hides them under her long black hair. Claudia has extremely protruding ears. "To be able to put my hair up and leave my ears free, that's my dream," raved the young woman recently. In the meantime, she has been spared her "suffering."

The operation lasted no longer than two hours. "My new ears are really great," she reported after the successful operation. The operation with the new method is no more trouble than a visit to the dentist; there are no more complications, says Merck. Since his method has been reported around Germany, the 59-year-old doctor has nearly been overwhelmed by the rush. "I had no idea that so many people suffered from their protruding ears," said Merck.

After a TV report, the Konstanz Clinic where Merck is an attending physician was besieged with hundreds of calls. Actually Merck isn't even the inventor of the new method: five years ago, an Israeli colleague published an article in a medical journal about his special needle-insertion technique, with which a stitch could be placed under the skin. However, the Israeli colleague also assumed that with floppy ears, the ear cartilage must be weakened mechanically so that the ear would be fastened permanently. "I too operated using the old method for 20 years," admits Merck.

Previously, the professional opinion of most ENT doctors was that the elasticity of the cartilage had to be corrected so that the ears could be fastened. Even today, the cartilage is cut open, shaved off, and cut off. The mechanical treatment of the ear cartilage with the scalpel is very risky because it often leads to infections. Furthermore, since the cartilage is tissue that has poor circulation, it is difficult to deploy medications there. An infection there can hardly be managed," as Merck knows from his own painful experience. Even antibiotics often fail with such infections.

In addition, there were bad cases of so-called "shrinkings." Then the ear often looks worse after the operation than beforehand. ENT doctor Merck asked himself whether it would not be sufficient to place a stitch in the inner ear fold, thus holding the ear fast so that the stitch holds the ear pressed in next to the head. In four years, he treated several hundred patients successfully. "It worked every time," reports Merck proudly. In no case did the nylon stitch tear, and the patients had no complaints. Patients receive only a local anesthetic and are otherwise fully conscious. Then Merck makes several stitches with a needle - so-called "mattress-stitches" - under the skin. Before the stitches are knotted permanently behind the ear, the patient can decide where the ears should be fastened. Only then is the stitch knotted permanently. Afterwards, not even an expert can tell that the ears have been operated on," claims Merck. Until now, it has remained an open question

whether all insurance companies would pay for the new operation method. At the moment, the procedures are still being examined. However, the insurance companies only pay for children and youths under 14 years of age. Adults must pay themselves," says Merck. Costs per ear: 2000 DM. Nevertheless, increasing

numbers of older people are coming to Konstanz. "My oldest patient was 73 years old," according to Merck. She had been hiding her ears her whole life. She left the operating room completely pleased, reports Merck. At last she could show her ears to the whole world, she told the doctor.

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