

## Fastening maneuver

Dumbo, "sail-ear," bat: anyone who has protruding ears doesn't have to go looking for ridicule. The larger the angle between the scalp and the auricle, the more ribald the teasing. For children with protruding ears, Kindergarten can become the prelude to hell. The helpless advice of parents, to "just let your hair grow," is a prelude in such cases to a lifelong game of "hide the ears." The only hope: the plastic surgeon. The traditional method of fastening ears is a truly bloody affair. Skin and cartilage must be removed or reshaped, so scars, edges, swelling, infections, and long-term pain are the consequences.

However, this is possible without boring and snipping: for the last five years, the Konstanz ENT doctor

Dr. Waldemar Merck has operated using a new method. "I heard about the stitch method for the first time from an Israeli colleague. However, in that procedure, the cartilage was still treated. In 1996, a Swiss farmer came to my practice. Because he absolutely had to be back in the stall the next day, the old method with a hospital stay wasn't a possibility for him. I told him about the new method and he immediately agreed to become my first patient," remembers Dr. Merck.

The Konstanz doctor calls his innovative fastening procedure a "minimally-invasive operation." A non-absorbable stitch is sunk invisibly under the skin and knotted as for a mattress knot. Thus a new fold is formed in the auricle and the protruding ear comes automatically into the desired position. The nearly bloodless procedure takes approximately one hour per ear and is performed on adults under local anesthesia. And now patients armed with a hand mirror can follow the course of the operation and correct the fastening maneuver according to their own notions. Cost: approximately 2300 DM per ear. For children and young people, the procedure is generally covered by insurance companies. "However, the insurance company rates do not nearly cover the costs," says Dr. Merck of the insurance companies.

A report in the SÜDKURIER last year elicited a powerful media echo. Günter Jauch could only tremble with the ears when the Konstanz ENT doctor demonstrated his fastening maneuver live on SternTV. Germany's most famous ear-fastener has had a full schedule since then. His practice is booked months in advance; three operations in a day are not uncommon. Will Dr. Merck soon tire of fastening ears? "When I was still operating using the old method, I hated fastening ears. The result was always unsatisfactory. With the stitch method, everything has changed. In my practice, I have witnessed heart-rending scenes. Patients have suddenly thrown their arms around my neck after they have seen themselves for the first time with fastened ears." During our interview, Dr. Merck fastened a patient's two ears, by way of an exception even on a Sunday. For on Monday, he was scheduled to make an appearance on a TV talk show.

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