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Leave Those Ears Alone

In the 1950s, kids routinely got their tonsils taken out. Then physicians such as Dr. Jack L. Paradise of the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine showed that the procedure brought no benefits to most children. In a study published last August, Paradise took on another common treatment: implanting tubes to drain the fluid in children's ears -- thought to hamper hearing and slow language development. Children with fluid do tend to have more speech problems. But Paradise believes the two conditions have a common cause: poor living conditions. "Medicine is fraught with error when people assume correlation is causality," he says. So Paradise did a study of 6,000 babies. By age three, 429 had persistent fluid in their ears. Half got ear tubes, the other half didn't -- and there was no difference in outcomes between the two groups. Paradise's advice to parents of such kids: "Don't just do something. Sit there." Many doctors still perform the surgery, however. "People are reluctant to believe our results," Paradise says. Why? "You get paid for operating and not paid for not operating."