

Take One Tablet and Call Me in the Morning

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Tablet computers have a large display screen, like a laptop. Instead of using a keyboard, however, the user enters information *via* hand-writing recognition software, or with an on-screen “virtual keyboard.” These computers have potential use in medical offices, particularly when there is not enough space in the examining room for a desktop or laptop computer. A tablet computer is similar in size to an 8.5 by 11-inch paper chart.

Several different tablet models are already available. More models will be available after Microsoft releases its new version of the Windows XP operating system, optimized for tablet PCs, later this year.

Medical Office Use

A tablet computer will be most useful as part of an electronic medical record system. Patient information can be downloaded before the patient visit even occurs. The physician can add new information during the current visit. The information can then be uploaded to the main office computer system, using a docking station or wireless technology.



Hospital Use

Some of these devices are already being used during ward rounds in teaching hospitals. For the individual physician, a tablet computer might be used to transfer patient records to and from the hospital.

Physician Acceptance

The use of the touch screen and handwriting recognition software may make the computer more user-friendly for physicians who are uncomfortable using a standard keyboard.

Patient Acceptance

Patients sometimes complain physicians in “wired” offices often spend more time communicating with the computer than with them. The compact size of a tablet computer may be less intrusive during the patient visit. The device can be positioned so both patient and physician can view the medical record or patient education materials.

Software Vendor Acceptance

One limiting factor in the adoption of this new technology is that software vendors will be reluctant to adapt their products, or will charge a premium to do so. At best, they probably will support only models from one or two manufacturers.

Security

Security is a key part of any electronic medical record system. Any portable computer is a target for theft, so patient information must be protected. Hewlett-Packard has addressed this issue on its Meritage model by incorporating a fingerprint recognition device. Other systems rely on password protection.



Laptop Comparison

For the moment, a laptop computer is a better investment than a tablet model. A laptop is more likely to be compatible with existing medical software and can also be used for other office functions, such as word processing, spreadsheets or databases. For continuous mobile use in a busy office, consider a model that allows you to install a second battery.

Handheld Comparison

The big advantage of handheld computers is their small size and portability. They perform their basic roles as address books, notebooks and calendars very well. One of the most pop-

ular medical uses of a handheld computer is as a bedside drug reference, using software such as Epocrates or Lexi-drugs. Handhelds can even provide bedside medical references, such as the *Harrison's Handbook of Internal Medicine*. The small screen and processing power, however, limit their role in medical offices.

Further Reading


The May 7, 2002 issue of *PC Magazine* contains an excellent review by Mary Kathleen Flynn, called "Is There a Tablet In Your Future?" The article is available in the "Reviews" section at the magazine's Web site (www.pcmag.com). As well as listing the features available on the current models, the review contains a "Checklist for the Ultimate Tablet."

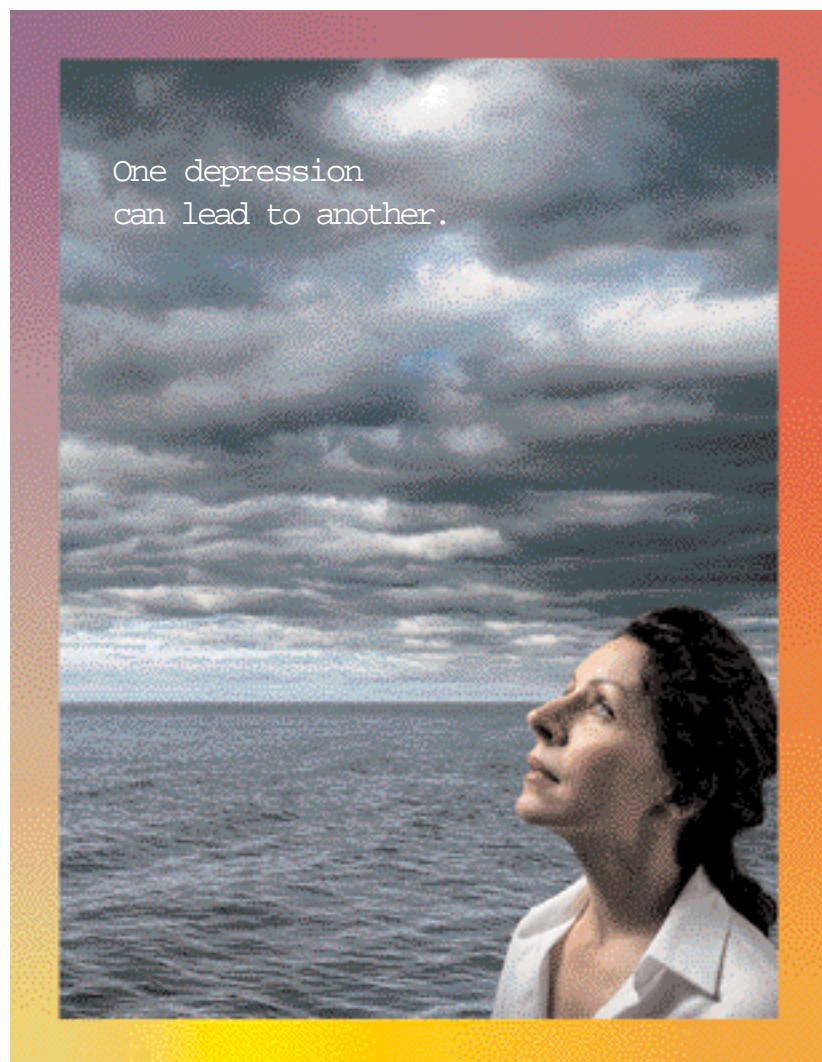


The Bottom Line

At the moment, tablet computers are primarily "techie toys" for those of us who watched too many Star Trek episodes in our youth. As the hardware and software matures, and as medical software vendors accept them, tablet computers may become widely used in medical offices.

Vendors and Models

- Acer Travelmate 100, www.acer.com
- Fujitsu LifeBook, LTP-600, and 3500, www.fujitsupc.com
- Hewlett-Packard Meritage, www.hp.com
- Toshiba Paperback, www.toshiba.com
- Viewsonic ViewPad, www.viewsonic.com 



One depression
can lead to another.