It’s “nurse Newbie’s” first day on the job and Doctor-I-have-the-worst-handwriting-in-the-world leaves an order to administer Z* & ^&(* every day for patient Hackie’s I’m-going-to-hack-out-a-lung-with-a-fever disease (yes, you guessed it, she’s related to Hattie and Hallie in Chapter 9). The writing is undecipherable except for the Z. Is it Zaditor, Zagam, Zantac, Zebeta, Zerit, Zestril, Zemplar, Zarontin, Zaroxolyn, Zemuron, Zenapax, zanamivir, zafirlukast, Ziagen, zaleplon, Zinacef, Zinecard, Z-max (who’s got time to write it out?), Ziac, Zocor, Zofran, Z-pak, Zonegran, Zonalon, Zostrix, Zosyn, Zovia, or Zovirax?

Well, if you guessed Zithromax, you’re probably right, but wouldn’t it be nice to look it up quickly and effortlessly on a handheld computer, to quickly confirm this with Doctor-I-have-the-worst-handwriting-in-the-world who is also known as Doctor-I-have-bad-phone-manners when called by the nursing staff? And even better would be having Doctor-I-have-the-worst-handwriting utilizing a handheld to beam his order regarding patient Hackie directly to nurse Newbie’s handheld during patient rounds. This solution would certainly eliminate those daily eyestrain headaches along with those testy calls to the provider for clarification.

Gone are the days when newly graduated nurses were armed with the information they would need for a lifetime of practice. Good nursing practice requires tools to extend the human mind’s limited capacity to recall and process large amounts of relevant variables. Handheld computers provide the solution to data access needs and help support the nurse’s clinical practice at the point of care.

An even more compelling reason is the opportunity presented by handheld computing to enhance patient safety and care. When the entire health-care team adopts handheld technology, the elusive improved efficiencies and patient record keeping promised by a standardized knowledge management system might be realized. After all, even Florence Nightingale was known as a “systems person,” compiling and analyzing statistics about
patient care so effectively that she helped to reduce the mortality rate for hospitalized soldiers from 38% to 2% during the Crimean War. Just imagine how much easier her job would have been if she had a handheld computer!

Clinicians have taken it upon themselves to adopt mobile computing. It is a grassroots movement initiated by physicians when they realized that handheld computers are particularly well suited for data collection, drug reference access, and various medical calculations at the point of care. Handhelds are currently experiencing significant growth in health care. These tiny, powerful computers are being used to support information management, general administration, and clinical practice.

Nurses began to notice the ubiquitous use of handhelds at the bedside by physicians and especially medical students. Their curiosity was piqued. Nurses wanted to know just what was on that electronic organizer that was so clinically useful at the bedside.

The adoption of handhelds for clinical practice by nurses lagged behind physicians by approximately 2 years. As recently as March 2000, conducting an Internet search with the search criteria: “Nurse + Palm”, would yield: nurse Jane Doe who lives in Palm Springs. Modifying the search to: “Nurse + Handheld + Computer” returned equally useless results. Why would a nurse want to hold the hand of her computer?

The movement to adopt Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) in nursing practice closely parallels the adoption of PDAs by physicians insofar as it is a grassroots movement. Web site articles on handheld computers in nursing are starting to appear online, and research on the use of mobile computing in nursing is beginning to be published. Mobile Nursing Informatics will be at the core of nursing in the twenty-first century. Ready access to data and analytical tools will fundamentally change the way practitioners of the health sciences practice, take care of patients, conduct research, and approach and solve problems. Integrating mobile information systems into the practice of health care will add value by helping to decrease costs, increase efficiency, and enhance patient and clinician satisfaction. These mobile computing devices will transform data into valuable information at the point of care. Handheld applications are recognized as significant tools to assist the clinician at the point of care. They support clinicians as does a colleague or a textbook, enhancing their training, experience, and common sense.

Currently, handheld computers are experiencing rapid adoption by nurses. Many of the handheld applications that were developed or adopted by physicians are also useful to nurses. The majority of data collection applications meet the needs of both physicians and nurses. These applications are probably adaptable to other healthcare professionals as well. The same can be said for many of the reference and drug database applications. Yet, nursing is different from medicine, and nurses have different software needs than physicians. As a result, responsive vendors are making nursing references available in handheld format.