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High Concept: Miracle Tablets

New rules covering medical data may create a market among M.D.'s for tablet PCs.

by [Anne Stuart](#)

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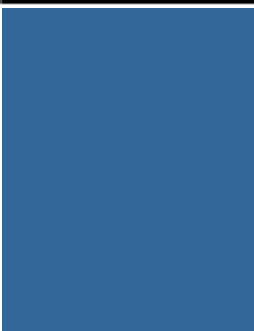
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High Concept

Dr. Ken Beer's dream may look something like a cross between a Nintendo Game Boy and an Etch A Sketch, but he prefers to refer to it as "the future of medicine." Beer, an entrepreneurial dermatologist, makes software for doctors to run on tablet computers. The problem is, tablet computers are just now hitting the market, which explains why Beer had to develop his software using a toy-like Casio touch-screen device that he rejiggered to suit his needs. Despite his lack of cutting-edge hardware, Beer believes that the finished software is poised to revolutionize the business of medicine while also improving patient care.

First, some background on tablet computing. For years manufacturers have tried to sell the public on slate-style computers that enable users to write rather than type text. Some, like the infamous Apple Newton, made it to market and then flopped for reasons ranging from cost to clunkiness. Beginning this month, many computer makers will begin releasing next-generation tablets that, unlike their predecessors, are as powerful as PCs and boast long-life batteries and high-resolution displays. Bill Gates -- whose Microsoft Corp. has created a Windows operating system for the new tablets -- predicts that slate-style computers will dominate the PC market by 2006. Analysts at Forrester Research, in Cambridge, Mass., are more cautiously optimistic, saying the tablets will catch on first in paperwork-dependent industries like, say, health care.

"I want it to be as simple as a McDonald's cash register: you just touch it and it's done," says Dr. Ken Beer

Enter Beer, a computer hobbyist. Two years ago Beer started designing comprehensive dermatology-practice software, paying freelance developers out of his own pocket. The software they produced manages a variety of tasks, from helping doctors write



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prescriptions and prepare bills to storing digital photographs of patients' lesions. Using a wireless network, doctors can carry the tablets from hospital room to hospital room, instantly up-dating patients' records or downloading results from distant labs.

Beer is seeking investors and partners to help him finish and market his first program, called **Dermsoftware**, which is designed for dermatologists; after that, he will expand in-to other medical specialties. At \$24,000 to \$32,000 per system (which covers the software license, upgrades, and a Hewlett-Packard server), Beer knows that he is asking a dear price. But he is convinced that medical practices will gladly pay it. According to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, health-care providers must meet sweeping new regulations for storing, protecting, and transmitting patients' health information by April 2003. Complying with the law could be a huge headache for doctors. Beer believes that his software offers just the relief they will need to make the transition.

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