Capturing, storing, analysing and re-accessing patient data from health professionals who are on the move is a major challenge to health information systems. While personal computers are now part of the furniture of many hospital wards, they don’t provide doctors and nurses with mobility. In some recent research, tablet PCs were tested for gathering and managing patient data in two departments at Auckland Hospital.

The tablets were provided by Hewlett Packard, as part of a grant made to the University of Auckland Business School’s Centre of Digital Enterprise (CODE). The trial was conducted by postgraduate students in Organisational Change and Innovation (OCI), lead by Drs. Judith McMorland and Darl Kolb, and sponsored by Steven Mayo-Smith, Director of Information Systems Department of the Auckland District Health Board.

Results varied between departments, but nurses were generally enthusiastic about having more and better information at the point of care, which was offered by the mobile PCs. The downsides of mobile technology were seen as security of the tablets; the potential risks to confidentiality; and the need for integration across multiple health databases and service providers. While some doctors are more comfortable with traditional communication methods, (eg. writing on paper), others were clearly supportive of mobile technologies, anticipating situations when they might be able to access databases, study cases and make prescriptions from anywhere, anytime.

Enhanced connectivity in healthcare also allows patients to update personal information, seek additional education and information related to health matters and interact with health providers in a more flexible manner. Bedside information, communication and entertainment facilities are in use in U.S. hospitals and may be tried in New Zealand soon. Bedside care has always been about listening, informing, and comforting. In the future, mobile and integrated technologies will support healthcare professionals and patients with more and better information—whenever and wherever they want or need it.