

The Question of Computerization

Editor's note: "Looking Back" usually features excerpts from *WMJs* 100 years or older. However, the focus of this themed issue of *WMJ* led us to look to the more recent past. The following excerpt is an introduction to the first in a series of informational articles about computers published in 1982. (*WMJ*. 1982;81[4]:40.) How things have changed in just 30 years!

Since about 1950, we have witnessed the growth of a new technology, of electronic information processing. Slowly at first, but at an ever-accelerating rate, digital computers of all sizes have diffused throughout the fabric of our culture. First, the universities and all branches of the government, then industry and commerce, and now our homes have welcomed this versatile assistant, advisor, and entertainer; to the point that, even now, it would be highly inconvenient (if not indeed disastrous) if all the computers were to be removed. And still the proliferation advances apace.

In particular, the field of medicine has seen the steady computerization of its activities; from the largest hospital complex to the smallest individual office; from accounting and billing to diagnostic aids, statistical recordkeeping, and

intensive-care monitoring. Tomography, blood-chemistry, and dietetic planning are now fully computerized; as are the physician's quartz-digital watch, his bank-account, his microwave oven, his flight reservation, his camera (and the design of its lenses), his insurance premiums, ...

In this environment, more and more people are wondering how soon and in what manner to begin using computers in their own activities, what computer systems to adopt, which services to employ, how much of their work to computerize, what software to purchase, how much to spend; and perhaps, too, they wonder how it all works and what the jargon means. The choices offered, and the attendant claims, are bewildering; and it is not too wise to buy a computer system first and learn the facts later.

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