Healthcare organizations are experiencing a quiet revolution. Fueled by economic pressures and a reexamination of the principles of distribution of care, these organizations are also committing to the onslaught of technology. As latecomers, healthcare delivery institutions are faced with the adoption of the prevailing innovations in information technology. The impacts of the Internet and innovations in telecommunications, computing, and the continuing influx of micro-devices are beginning to be felt in healthcare delivery.

The brunt of these effects are found in the confluence of the technology itself with innovations in marketing, management, and the changing perspective of the healthcare consumer. There is a growing trend of increased awareness, empowerment, and changes in the attitudes of healthcare consumers regarding the delivery of healthcare services. The intersection of these forces of change is engendering a tremendous growth in knowledge flowing through the healthcare system. From the bedside to medical school, from the examining room and the medical encounter to the patient and the family’s role in the delivery of healthcare services, there are now many new facets to our knowledge about healthcare and its delivery.

The medical profession is confronted with a dramatic rise in medical knowledge. Genetic research, new drugs, and an expanding field of research in areas such as biotechnology and biomedical engineering are creating a strong need to manage this avalanche of knowledge. Medical professionals and particularly medical students are now routinely armed with PDAs and other miniaturized information technology devices that allow them to access this vast array of knowledge. In healthcare delivery, as well as in so many other disciplines and professions, we now produce more knowledge in a day than in hundreds — perhaps thousands — of years of human history. Imagine if we were to produce more automobiles in one day than in the previous 100 years. Our highways and byways would be immediately clogged, and it would be a horrific task to sort out this traffic jam. A similar situation occurs in the growth of knowledge in the healthcare delivery arena.

To sort out the jammed passages of the accumulation of a continuing production of knowledge in healthcare delivery organizations there is a crying need for knowledge
management, capable of inserting some order into the increasingly confusing state of affairs. Since healthcare is notoriously slow in adopting such innovations, we are now beginning to see the initial forays of these organizations into the era of knowledge management systems. These are cautious “baby-steps” that the industry is taking, and there is presently very little systematic work that documents such a passage into a new age of managing knowledge.

This book, edited by Professors Wickramasinghe, Gupta and Sharma is a true pioneering effort to open up the field of knowledge management to healthcare organizations and professionals. It’s a unique enterprise of the utmost importance. As we witness the transformation of patient care with the advent of wireless hospitals, medical staffs connected to the Internet, and the revolution in the structure and architecture of care and the bedside, it is a perplexing thought that knowledge management in this dynamic area has not yet been adequately studied. This book heralds a new era of the systematic examination of the principles and the practices of knowledge management. It captures the experiences in other, first-adopters industries, and offers potential schemes and methods to better introduce and adopt knowledge management systems in healthcare delivery organizations.

In the final analysis, healthcare delivery is the manipulation of knowledge, and the management of organizations — including healthcare organizations — is the management of knowledge. We are now realizing that unless organizations are capable of effectively administering the knowledge they need to act and to survive, they are destined to failure. This book offers a thoughtful array of topics, ranging from the principles of knowledge management, e-health organizations, knowledge management infrastructure, and how to start and improve knowledge management systems. It’s an initial attempt to create awareness of the importance of knowledge management in healthcare delivery. It’s also the sounding of a call to other scholars to join in exploring the vital and rapidly growing area of knowledge management in healthcare delivery organizations.