

SEH500 Course Assignment Report: The Pain Level Communicator (PLC)

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Date: November 30, 2025

Platform: NXP FRDM-K66F (ARM Cortex-M4)

1. Problem Statement

Pain management is a critical component of patient care, yet it relies heavily on the patient's ability to communicate verbally. For patients with limited mobility, neurological impairments (such as stroke or ALS), or those who are intubated in critical care, expressing pain levels is physically difficult and slow. Traditional methods, such as the "**Wong-Baker FACES**" paper chart, require a nurse to be physically present to interpret the patient's distress. This latency in communication can lead to delayed analgesic administration, increased patient suffering, and poorer recovery outcomes.



The problem this project addresses is the lack of an **immediate, digital, and remote** interface for non-verbal patients to quantify their pain and receive instant confirmation that help is on the way.

2. Background Research

The *Federal Disability Report* states that over 13% of Canadian adults face daily activity limitations due to disability. In clinical settings, assistive technology is shifting from mechanical aids to microcontroller-based "smart" systems.

Existing solutions fall into two categories: simple nurse-call buttons (binary ON/OFF) which lack severity detail, or complex bedside tablets requiring fine motor control often unavailable to the target demographic. Our research identifies a gap for a device combining the simplicity of a single-button interface with the data granularity of a digital system. By utilizing the Cortex-M4 processor, we can bridge this gap with real-time processing and low-latency hardware control [2].

3. Proposed Solution

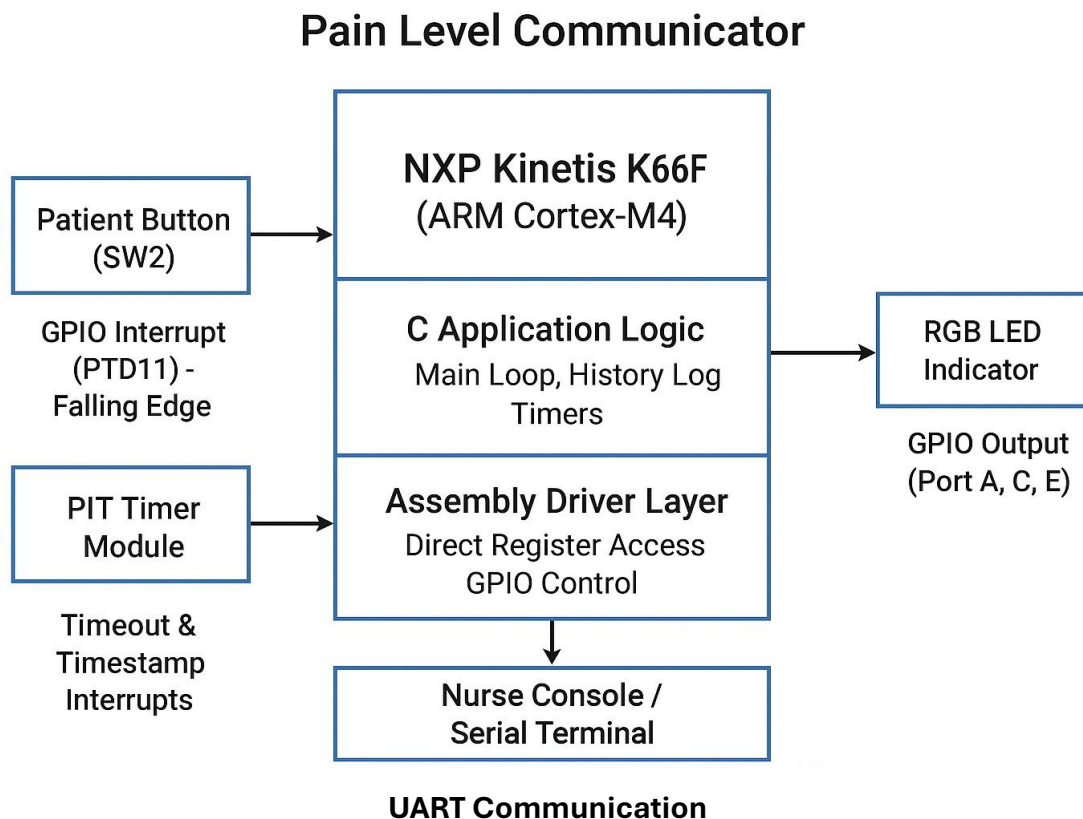
The **Pain Level Communicator (PLC)** is an embedded system designed on the NXP FRDM-K66F platform. It serves as a bridge between the patient and the nursing station.

The solution operates on a "Single-Input, Multi-Output" architecture:

1. **Input:** A single button (SW2) allows the patient to increment their pain level from 1 (Mild) to 5 (Severe).
2. **Feedback Loop:** An onboard RGB LED provides immediate visual confirmation to the patient using a color-coded spectrum (Green to Red).
3. **Communication:** The system transmits the data via UART to a Nurse Console, logging the event.
4. **Two-Way Interaction:** Crucially, the system allows the nurse to send feedback commands ('A' for Acknowledge, 'M' for Meds, 'D' for Doctor) which triggers specific lighting states on the patient's board, closing the communication loop.

The system uses **mixed-language programming**, utilizing C for high-level logic and data structures, and **GNU Assembly** for direct, low-level hardware driver control.

4. System Block Diagram & Module Explanation



4.1 Hardware Abstraction Layer (Assembly Module)

To meet the rigorous timing and control requirements of real-time embedded systems, the LED control logic was written entirely in GNU Assembly (led_logic.s). This module acts as a custom driver, bypassing the standard SDK libraries to interact directly with the microcontroller's Memory-Mapped I/O registers. The system utilizes interrupt-driven logic to capture real-time inputs without blocking the main processor loop.

- **Patient Button (SW2):** Configured on Pin **PTD11** with an internal pull-up resistor. A falling-edge GPIO interrupt (PORTD_IRQHandler) captures asynchronous button presses and instantly increments the session counter variables.
- **PIT Timer Module:** The Periodic Interrupt Timer is split into a channel to handle distinct timing needs. **Channel 0** acts as a 1.5-second "session timeout" watchdog to delimit distinct pain entry events.

```
// 1. GPIO Interrupt Handler (Button Press)
void PORTD_IRQHandler(void) {
    GPIO_PortClearInterruptFlags(SW2_GPIO, 1U << SW2_PIN);

    press_count++;
    input_active = true;

    // Reset Timeout Window
    PIT_StopTimer(PIT, kPIT_Chnl_0);
    PIT_StartTimer(PIT, kPIT_Chnl_0);

    PRINTF("Button Pressed! Current Session Count: %d\r\n", press_count);
}
```

4.2 Central Processing Architecture

The core logic is divided into two distinct abstraction layers to optimize both data handling and hardware speed.

- **C Application Logic (High-Level):** Located in Project.c, this layer manages the system state. It handles the circular buffer for the patient_history array, polls the UART status flags for incoming nurse commands, and orchestrates the logic flow between interrupts.
- **Assembly Driver Layer (Low-Level):** Located in led_logic.s, this layer provides atomic control over the hardware. It bypasses standard SDK overhead to manipulate Memory-Mapped I/O registers (PDOR, SCGC5) directly, ensuring zero-latency responsiveness for the visual output.

```
set_red:
    LDR R1, =GPIOC_PDOR
    LDR R2, [R1]
    LDR R3, =PIN9_MASK
    BIC R2, R2, R3      /* Clear Bit 9 (Red ON) */
    STR R2, [R1]
    B done_led
done_led:
```

4.3 Output & Communication Interfaces

- **RGB LED Indicator:** Driven directly by the Assembly layer, this module maps integer pain levels (1-5) and medical codes (6-7) to specific GPIO bit-masks on Ports A, C, and E.
- **Nurse Console (UART):** A bidirectional serial interface configured at 115200 baud. It transmits formatted pain level data to the monitoring station and receives command characters ('A', 'M', 'D') to trigger feedback routines like asm_nurse_ack.

5. Concept Validation & Improvements

Our solution validates the concept of "**Responsive Assistive Tech.**" Unlike a standard call bell, the PLC validates the patient's input twice: once locally (via color change) and once remotely (via the Nurse Acknowledgment light).

Feature	Standard Call Bell	Bedside Tablet	PLC (Our Solution)
Input Method	Single Button	Touchscreen	Single Button (Debounce)
Information	Binary (On/Off)	High Detail	Quantitative (1–5 Scale)
Latency	Low	High (Boot/UI Load)	Ultra-Low (Interrupt Driven)
Feedback	None	Screen UI	RGB LED Color Code

By using direct register manipulation in Assembly, we demonstrated that the GPIO control has negligible latency compared to HAL-based libraries, ensuring the patient sees the LED change the instant the logic confirms the level.

6. Development Process & Obstacles

Developing the PLC presented several technical challenges that required debugging and architectural changes.

Obstacle 1: The Bus Fault (Precise Data Error)

Issue: Early in development, the application crashed immediately upon startup with a PRECISERR Hard Fault.

Root Cause: We attempted to write to the GPIO Output Registers in our Assembly driver before the generic C initialization code had enabled the clocks for Ports A and E. The memory-mapped addresses were "dark," causing the CPU to panic.

Solution: We implemented a "Manual Clock Force" routine in main(), explicitly calling CLOCK_EnableClock(kCLOCK_PortA/C/D/E) before invoking any Assembly setup routines. This ensured the hardware peripheral bus was active.

```
int main(void) {
    BOARD_InitBootPins();
    BOARD_InitBootClocks();
    BOARD_InitBootPeripherals();
    BOARD_InitDebugConsole();

    CLOCK_EnableClock(kCLOCK_PortA);
    CLOCK_EnableClock(kCLOCK_PortC);
    CLOCK_EnableClock(kCLOCK_PortD);
    CLOCK_EnableClock(kCLOCK_PortE);
}
```

Obstacle 2: Input Accumulation Logic

Issue: Pressing the button for "Level 1" followed by "Level 2" resulted in a reading of "Level 3." The system was accumulating presses infinitely.

Solution: We introduced a session-based logic. A global variable `press_count` tracks the current input sequence. Once the PIT timer fires (indicating the user has stopped pressing for 1.5 seconds), the value is committed to the `stored_pain_level` variable, and `press_count` is strictly reset to 0.

Obstacle 3: 2-Way Communication Feedback

Issue: Initially, the nurse acknowledgment simply blinked a blue light. Testing revealed this might be confusing or alarming to a patient.

Solution: We upgraded the Assembly logic to support a "Medical Protocol." We mapped UART characters to distinct states: 'A' (Ack) triggers a steady White light (calming), while 'M' triggers Cyan. This required rewriting the `asm_set_pain_led` branching logic to handle command codes > 5.

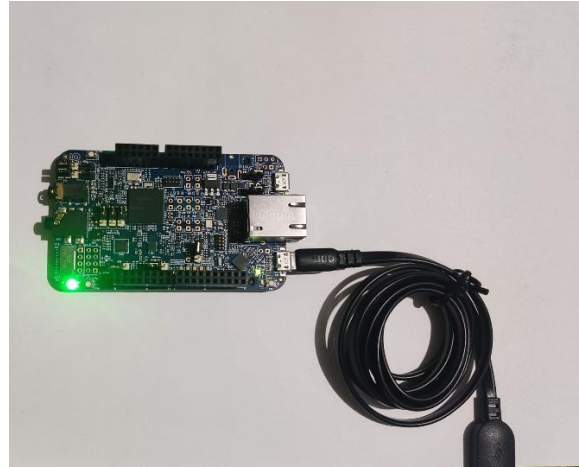
7. Project Configuration & Reproducibility To ensure the successful replication of this project on the NXP FRDM-K66F platform, the following hardware and software configurations must be verified within the MCUXpresso IDE environment:

1. **Driver Dependencies:** Include GPIO, UART, PIT, and PORT drivers during creation.
2. **Clock Gating:** We implemented a "Manual Clock Force" routine in `main()` to explicitly enable clocks for Ports A, C, D, and E. This prevents PRECISERR Bus Faults when Assembly drivers access hardware registers.
3. **Pin Routing:**
 - **Input:** The User Button (SW2) must be routed to **PTD11** (GPIOD, Pin 11).
 - **Interrupts:** The internal Pull-Up Resistor and "Falling Edge" interrupt logic are configured programmatically in `Project.c`, removing the need for complex GUI configuration tools.
 - **Communication:** The Debug UART must be configured to **115200 Baud, 8N1** to ensure synchronization with the serial terminal.

8. Demonstration of Functionality

```
COM3 x

=====
Pain Level Communicator (PLC) v1.0
=====
COMMANDS:
[A] - Acknowledge (White Light)
[M] - Meds Sent (Cyan Light)
[D] - Doctor Summoned (White Light)
[S] - Generate Analysis Sheet
[R] - Reset System & Clear History
=====
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 1
PAIN_LEVEL:1
```



Caption: Figure 1: The FRDM-K66F board indicating "Level 1" via the Assembly-driven RGB LED.

```
COM3 x

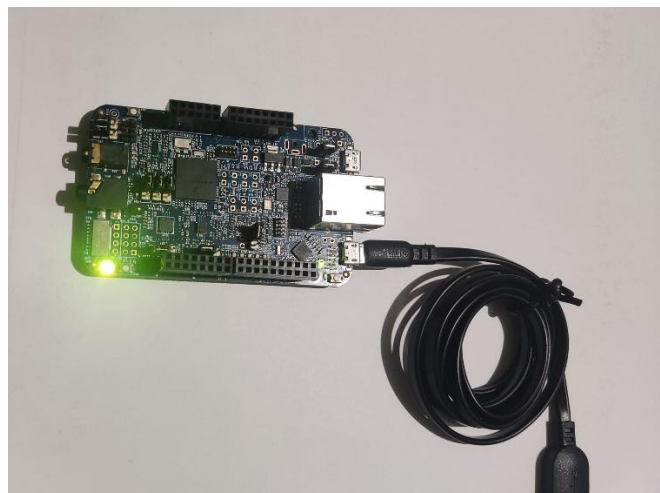
=====
Pain Level Communicator (PLC) v1.0
=====
COMMANDS:
[A] - Acknowledge (White Light)
[M] - Meds Sent (Cyan Light)
[D] - Doctor Summoned (White Light)
[S] - Generate Analysis Sheet
[R] - Reset System & Clear History
=====
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 1
PAIN_LEVEL:1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 2
PAIN_LEVEL:2
```



Caption: Figure 2: The FRDM-K66F board indicating "Level 2" via the Assembly-driven RGB LED.

```
COM3 x

=====
Pain Level Communicator (PLC) v1.0
=====
COMMANDS:
[A] - Acknowledge (White Light)
[M] - Meds Sent (Cyan Light)
[D] - Doctor Summoned (White Light)
[S] - Generate Analysis Sheet
[R] - Reset System & Clear History
=====
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 1
PAIN_LEVEL:1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 2
PAIN_LEVEL:2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 3
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 3
PAIN_LEVEL:3
```

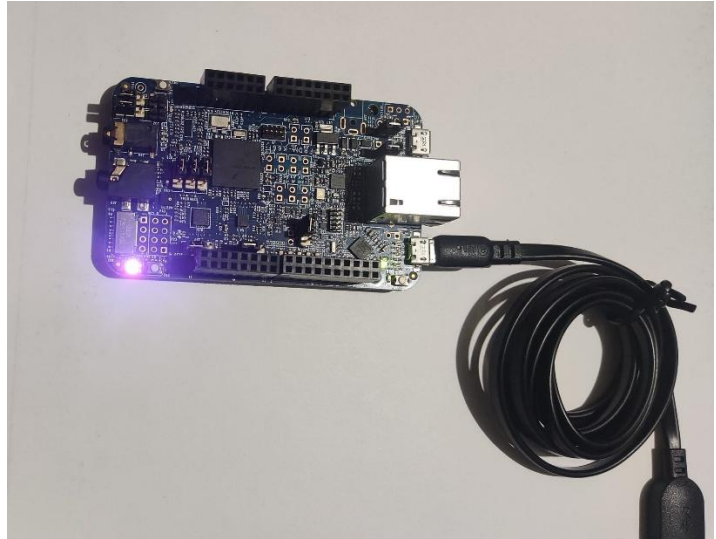


Caption: Figure 3: The FRDM-K66F board indicating "Level 3" via the Assembly-driven RGB LED.

```

COM3 x
=====
Pain Level Communicator (PLC) v1.0
=====
COMMANDS:
[A] - Acknowledge (White Light)
[M] - Meds Sent (Cyan Light)
[D] - Doctor Summoned (White Light)
[S] - Generate Analysis Sheet
[R] - Reset System & Clear History
=====
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 1
PAIN_LEVEL:1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 2
PAIN_LEVEL:2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 3
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 3
PAIN_LEVEL:3
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 3
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 4
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 4
PAIN_LEVEL:4

```

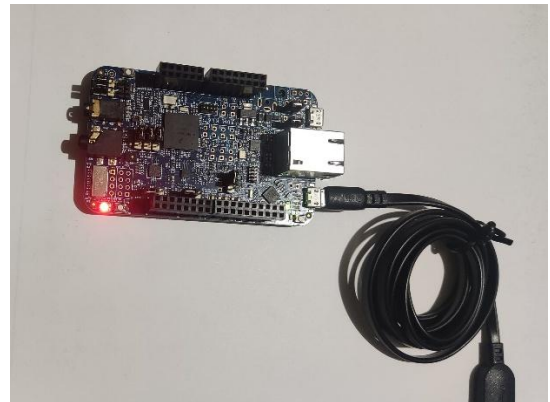


Caption: Figure 4: The FRDM-K66F board indicating "Level 4" via the Assembly-driven RGB LED.

```

PAIN_LEVEL:4
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 3
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 4
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 5
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 5
PAIN_LEVEL:5

```

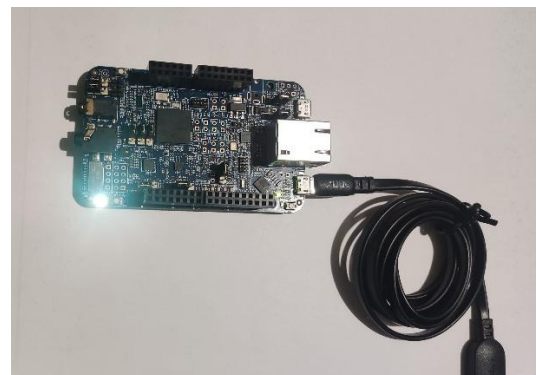


Caption: Figure 5: The FRDM-K66F board indicating "Level 5" via the Assembly-driven RGB LED.

```

PAIN_LEVEL:4
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 1
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 2
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 3
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 4
Button Pressed! Current Session Count: 5
Input Complete. Final Pain Level: 5
PAIN_LEVEL:5
[Nurse]: DOCTOR SUMMONED.

```



Caption: Figure 6: The "Doctor" state. The White light indicates the doctor has received the message.

```

--- PATIENT HISTORY ANALYSIS ---
Event #1: Pain Level 2
Event #2: Pain Level 1
Event #3: Pain Level 3
Event #4: Pain Level 3
Event #5: Pain Level 4
Event #6: Pain Level 5
-----
Total Events Recorded: 6
-----

```

Caption: Figure 7: Serial Terminal showing the Patient History Log with Timestamps and Nurse Interaction.

8. Future Work

While the current prototype is fully functional, future iterations could enhance usability:

1. **IoT Integration:** Replacing the UART cable with an ESP8266 Wi-Fi module to transmit pain levels to a web dashboard.
2. **PWM Brightness:** Using Pulse Width Modulation (PWM) in Assembly for smoother color transitions (fading) rather than binary switching.
3. **Non-Volatile Storage:** Writing the patient_history array to the board's Flash memory so data persists even after power loss.

9. Conclusion

The Pain Level Communicator successfully demonstrates the power of the ARM Cortex-M4 in medical applications. By integrating 100+ lines of custom GNU Assembly with high-level C logic, we created a device that is fast, reliable, and user-centric. The project meets all requirements, including two-way serial communication, interrupt-driven inputs, and hardware timer logging, providing a measurable improvement over traditional non-verbal pain assessment tools.

10. References

[1] Government of Canada, "Federal Disability Report," *Publications.gc.ca*, 2011. [Online]. Available: <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.505762/publication.html>. [2] J. Yiu, *The Definitive Guide to ARM® Cortex®-M3 and Cortex®-M4 Processors*, 3rd ed. Oxford: Newnes, 2013. [3] NXP Semiconductors, "FRDM-K66F User's Guide," Rev. 2, 2016.

Morales-Brown, L. (2022, December 23). *What to know about the Wong-Baker pain scale*. **Medical News Today**. Medically reviewed by Lauren Castiello, MS, AGNP-C. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/wong-baker-pain-scale>