

State Pain Initiative Website Building Guide

Introduction

This brief manual is intended to help guide state pain initiatives through the process of building a website that will increase public awareness of your organization and its goals, and allow you to communicate with that public.

It will walk you through the steps involved in tailoring your message and the face you present to the world at large; organizing content and planning hyperlinks; working with content experts and design and programming professionals; and keeping your site updated and current.

The manual assumes that you have basic familiarity with web browsing: navigating through hyperlinks and multiple windows or tabs, using search engines, and so forth. More technical aspects will be explained, but the goal is to allow someone who is not a web expert to play a leading role in putting together a site. The “you” this manual is directed toward might be a board member or staff member of a state pain initiative, or a writer hired to work with such an organization. Like the field of palliative care, web building is the work of a collaborative, interdisciplinary team; whatever your role, this manual is meant to help you work with other members of the team. It largely deals with writing and organizing a website, but always in the context of an effort that requires more than just a writer.

Please note that examples of issues you will face are drawn from experience in putting together the website for the Michigan Cancer Pain Initiative. When reference is made to “our site” or something similar, it is talking about the MCPI site that can be found at www.mipain.org. As you will see, the various state pain initiative websites that already exist have taken different approaches toward organization and message, and they will be valuable for you to look at as well.

Shaping Your Website's Content

The Message and the Medium – the Message Comes First

The growth of the Internet and the web has led to a communications revolution, changing the way we seek and sift through information. But before you build a website, you have to answer the same question that would come up if you were putting on a TV or radio program, writing a newspaper article, placing an advertisement, or making a phone call:

What do you want to say?

Hopefully, your state pain initiative already has a set of goals and objectives. Perhaps they're expressed as a mission statement, or clearly stated in some other form. But if they're not – if they exist only as a set of shared but unspoken assumptions – this is the time for the leaders of your organization to talk about them and write them down. And when you've clearly identified your goals, you can begin to put together your website's message.

Is your primary mission to educate healthcare professionals about best practices in treating pain, or to educate the public about the range of treatment options available? Then make that mission a centerpiece of your message: *We are here to give you information about pain treatment.* And then go on to provide some of that information. (Making choices about the depth and comprehensiveness of the information you provide will be discussed later on; for now it is enough to lay out your message in broad strokes.)

If your organization is dedicated to changing state regulations or the way hospitals and other institutions approach pain issues, let your audience know that and give examples of what you're doing. And if one of your goals is to grow the network of advocates for change, part of your website's message should be *Here's how you can join us.*

It may be helpful to think of the website and its message as part of a conversation. If you were simply talking to someone about your organization, what are the first things you would want to say? What would you expect them to ask in response? If they wanted more information, what would you have readily available?

As you consider your goals and imagine such a conversation, an outline of your message will likely take shape. The information you wish to convey will start to fit into broad categories, and those categories will be the beginning of your plan to arrange information on your site.

When we began work on the Michigan Cancer Pain Initiative website, we first turned to the initiative’s stated goals:

- Enhance the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the healthcare professionals who treat cancer pain
- Identify and eliminate barriers to cancer pain relief
- Work with organizations, agencies, institutions, and individuals involved with cancer patients and relief
- Educate patients and families on techniques and therapies available to relieve Cancer Pain
- Serve as a resource about cancer pain relief

Those goals, already set out with the kind of brevity that works well on the web, were placed on our homepage, and also became a basis for the organization of the site. We would want to speak to professionals and the public, acting as a resource for both; we would have a major focus on cancer pain treatment and on barriers to treatment; we would give at least an overview of just what kind of “work with organizations, agencies, institutions and individuals involved with cancer patients” is being done.

Organizing Your “Content Tree”

As has already been mentioned, the notes you’re making about the message and information you want to get across may easily take the form of an outline, especially as you begin to add more details. It’s important to keep in mind, however, that the outline of an informational website needs to conform to a particular set of demands different from those of an academic paper or other printed material.

There are two main features to remember: the levels of hierarchy in your content outline should be few, and the individual pages of content should be short.

Levels of Hierarchy

Visualizing your outline as an inverted tree, like a family tree or organizational chart, you can see how it might become long and complex as you add more information. Unfortunately, the more branches that spring out, the harder it can be to keep track of them all. This becomes especially true with each new level of subdivision. In the family tree, the relationship of distant cousins is no longer clear or perhaps no longer known; and in the organization of your website, it may become harder and harder to tell which pieces go together to form the big picture.

In order to deal with the potential for confusion – especially on a website whose purpose is in part to educate about a topic that will be new to many users – a good rule of thumb is to have no more than four levels of depth in your content tree. But note that there is less restriction on horizontal breadth than on vertical depth in your tree – a larger number of “sibling” pages on a single generational level is less likely to cause confusion than an excessive number of levels.

Figure 1 at the end of this manual shows the organization of the content of the Michigan Cancer Pain Initiative website, with no more than four levels of informational hierarchy (and on most paths, only three levels). Figure 2 shows the organization of one of three main content areas of the Completing a Life website created at Michigan State University (www.completingalife.msu.edu), which addresses a full range of end-of-life issues with many more pages than the MCPI site, but still adheres to the four-level rule. (A flowchart containing the organization of all three main content areas could not fit on a one-page flowchart, but a listing of all the topics and subtopics – showing how even more information can fit in four levels – can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/5teahh>.)

If you go to the sites you will also see that a second rule is observed, this one involving the length of each page.

Keeping Content Pages Short

A web page can theoretically go on forever, scrolling down until every last word on the topic has been spoken. However, users of your site are unlikely to keep reading that long – the *feeling* that a page is going on forever is a barrier to continued interest in the content. So whenever it's possible, keeping the content short enough to fit on a single screen without scrolling is the goal to shoot for; and twice that length – two screens' worth that can be read through by scrolling one time – should be the outside limit. It is better to break topics up into separate pieces that fit onto shorter pages than to cram too much information onto a single page.

The need to be short and concise may raise a concern that you won't be able to provide all the information a user needs on a particular subject. Breaking up topics into smaller pages addresses this concern in part, but it is also important to realize that the web is *not* the best medium for presenting dense information. This is not where one comes to find a topic treated exhaustively, and providing such detail ought not to be your goal.

Nor should you worry much about possibly oversimplifying complex material. If you have that concern, it's helpful to make the distinction between simplicity and clarity – there is nothing simpleminded about clearly defining a topic so that readers can find more information elsewhere.

If the rough content outline you have begun to create does not conform to these guidelines for content depth and page length, you'll need to start adjusting it. Ask yourself what topics can be divided into shorter, more easily digestible nuggets of information. And look especially at the top-level categories of your outline: in the best-case scenario they should be able to contain all the topics you want to present to users of your site while also representing the overarching goals of your organization.

Meeting both those needs in a short-page, four-level hierarchy may require a bit of creative thinking. Don't be afraid to experiment and don't get locked into linear thinking. Remember that the web is all about linking (see the Design and Navigation section), and information doesn't have to be laid out in strictly A-B-C-D fashion.

Other Content Issues

New Content vs. Linked Content

When it comes to the core mission and values of your organization, you will want to present them to site users with a consistent voice. But not everything you want users to know about needs to be presented as original content. Many of the discrete topics you want to cover are discussed at other websites that you can direct users to. And valuable tools, such as pocket pain treatment guides for physicians and notebooks for patients to keep records of their pain and activities, have been developed elsewhere and are available for linking and downloading. Rather than reinvent the wheel, focus on what's unique to your organization and on the identity you want to present to the world.

Look at other state pain initiative websites, including the sites they link to, to identify content that you can reference by linking rather than duplicating. A list of state pain initiative sites is at <http://aspi.wisc.edu/initweb.htm>.

Specialized Content

If your organization has undertaken special initiatives that professionals and the public ought to know about, by all means plan to highlight them. You might want to present these in a way that's separate from your main informational and educational content; and as you begin to work on navigation with a site designer, you can figure out together just how to give specialized content the presentation it needs.

But as you think about promoting your activities on the web, be aware that users will expect your site to be up to date. Any kind of database like a directory of pain care providers, as some sites offer, will have to be kept current, so it's important to be sure that staff resources are available to do that.

Other Considerations for Top-Level Categories

When you look at other state pain initiative websites, you'll see that they take different approaches to the top-level organization of their content. These differences are largely based on how they identify their goals – whether they are trying, for example, to carry out an educational mission, provide the latest news about their work, or act as a clearinghouse for information. But another issue to be aware of, particularly if education is a goal, is whether you want first to provide different navigational paths for different audiences, or instead to highlight the major subject areas your site deals with.

At our Michigan site, the main content focuses on the basic areas of knowledge we wanted users to be familiar with. So we looked for content headings that would make sense for more than one audience, though the subheadings and details would vary. The message is a subtle but potentially important one: patients, families, doctors, nurses and others are on an equal footing, all seeking to be the best informed partners they can be in a team effort to address pain.

Outside the Main Content

In addition to your central content, you will almost certainly want to include a section containing links to other websites that deal with issues related to pain. Beyond that, you can consider offering:

- A calendar of events
- The latest news about your organization
- A sign-up spot to receive news by email
- A way to join your organization
- A way to make a financial gift to your organization
- Annotation of your links to other websites to give users a more complete sense of the content to be found there
- A clear statement that your website is not providing individual medical advice (and other disclaimers as appropriate)

Design and Navigation

Given the collaborative nature of web building, it is important to assemble a team early in the process. If you haven't worked with a web designer before, ask around to get recommendations, and then look at sites created by the people you are considering working with. You could also start by looking at the websites of local businesses and organizations, and when you find one you like, ask for the name of the designer and about the experience of working with that person. A designer will have access to people who write HTML code, the "language" that underlies all web pages, and who in addition can consult about what can and can't be done from a technical standpoint.

As a writer and/or content expert, you will have come up with a draft outline of your site. But before you begin to transform that outline into written pages of content, it's a smart idea to consult with your designer. The designer is not just there to make the pages look pretty, but is someone who understands the user's experience of the web and knows how to make information flow effectively. Reviewing your outline and imagining the finished product, the designer can stand in the place of the user and assess whether the organization you've proposed will make the content easy to find. And if you are having difficulty keeping your content hierarchy to four levels or less, a good designer should be able to help you sort your topics to fit that structure.

The collaboration between the writer and designer, and to a lesser extent the coder, is an ongoing one that should ideally involve plenty of give and take. Just as the designer can give valuable feedback on an initial outline, a writer can respond to elements of a proposed design – from color scheme to images to navigation tools. And the work of one will begin to shape the work of the other, so that design reflects the content and content is tweaked to fit comfortably on the page.

How the Web Works – Graphics and Linking

It cannot be stressed enough that people take in content on the web very differently from the way they absorb information in a book or magazine. Design and layout are of course very important on those printed pages, but on the web, graphical presentation can make or break your site. If your pages are not pleasing to the eye, users may turn away before they even give the site a chance. And when it comes to considering the look and feel of a site, one of the most important things for writers to remember is this:

Dense prose is simply not suited to the computer screen.

It is much more effective to present information in small, easily digestible bites: short pages with short paragraphs and bullet points make the online reading experience go down a lot more smoothly.

This can appear to create a dilemma to the writer who has a lot to say. Even recognizing the value of making your content easier to read and absorb, you may feel compelled to “get it all in there” so that important information will not be missed. There are two main responses to this concern, one that can be expressed negatively and one positively:

- If you cram in too much text, people will not start reading it in the first place, so they will not get *any* of the information.
- With hyperlinking, the web medium provides an alternative means of assembling large amounts of information comprehensibly.

Since you do want people to read what you’ve written, you will need to rely on linking to convey the breadth of the material your site has to offer. Here again, a clear and straightforward outline will be very important. The outline describes the links among your site’s pages by showing their relationships to one another. At the finished website, on whatever page users find themselves, you want those relationships to be as plain as possible; that way users can identify the main subject of the page and grasp what topics are related to it. Linking to subtopics helps readers get a sense of what else there is to know without asking them to absorb it all at once; while linking to higher level topics helps them keep in mind where the material on each page fits within a larger body of knowledge.

There are a couple of ways to include links in your text, and as you write the individual pages with your outline in mind, you will start to get a feel for which approach works best in a particular situation. If you’ve written a brief introduction to a main topic and the next thing you want to say is, *Here are more detailed explanations*, a simple list of links at the end of the page will probably do the job. If you are making allusions to the subtopics within the body of the text, the links can be highlighted there (as in a sentence such as, “The treatment of pain may involve [medications](#), [surgical interventions](#) or [complementary and alternative therapies](#)”). This kind of in-the-text link is especially appropriate if you are making reference to subjects that are not “child” topics to the current page but “cousin” pages elsewhere in the site, or if you are linking to external sites.

A single page can use both these kinds of link – that is, the linked-to page can be made available through a hyperlink within the text as well as one that is part of a list at the end of the text. Additionally, each page will have some form of navigation bar that remains constant throughout the site, one element of a graphical template that unites the site with a consistent look and feel. This navigation component should as far as possible make the place of each page within the site self-evident, so it may make some of your text-based links unnecessary.

Look at www.mipain.org/treatingpain/treatment.php for an example of a page that shows the relationships among pages by use of page heading, navigation bar, in-the-text-links and a listing of subtopics.

And remember that another way to think “webbily” instead of linearly is to link to the same page of information from more than one other page on your site. This kind of redundancy helps users find the material they need and reinforces the message that individual bites of information are broadly connected.

Linking to External Sites and Liability Issues

There is linking that makes a web out of a single site, and there is linking that makes a gigantic web out of all the pages that people and institutions have placed on the Internet. Since there is bound to be much content appropriate for your site that is already on the web, it makes sense to take advantage of that fact. It’s important, however, that you let users of your site know that you are not responsible for what appears at sites you have no control over. Some form of disclaimer, whether a single generalized statement or one that pops up whenever a user clicks on an external link, or both, ought to appear on your site in order to reduce claims of liability against your organization.

Thinking about the Homepage

The old saying has it that you don’t get a second chance to make a first impression. The place where your website makes its first impression – where it makes the case to potential users that it has something to offer that is worth their time – is the homepage. The goals of being brief, clear, and visually attractive and uncluttered are nowhere more important.

The homepage is also where you answer the question “What do you want to say?” in broad and unambiguous terms. Whether or not you do so by referencing your strategic vision or mission statement, you want to let new users know exactly what the site is there for. Bullet points or very short paragraphs will help convey your organization’s identity most clearly and accessibly; jargon and legalisms will not.

And especially because state pain initiatives deal with issues that raise fears and misgivings, you want to make sure that in your text and in the appealing look of your design, your immediate message is one of welcome and reassurance.

Other Uses for the Homepage

The model provided by our Michigan site is of course not the only one that can be followed. Although visual attractiveness and content clarity are a must for any homepage, our focus on the initiative’s primary goals (as bullet points) and a message of warmth and welcome was largely dictated by the site’s emphasis on education.

Other sites may focus less on education than on plain description of the organization’s mission; or on practical tools that it may offer (e.g., a pain provider directory for professionals to get listed on and patients to draw from, or pocket guides for professionals to refer to when dealing with patients in pain); or on the latest news about what the organization is doing. Sites like these may have more content on their

homepages, making the look and feel of those pages a little busier, but a writer and designer working together can still make sure that even a more content-heavy homepage seems fresh and readable – inviting rather than off-putting.

Both the Massachusetts Pain Initiative (www.masspaininitiative.org) and the Missouri Pain Initiative (www.missouripain.org) offer examples of a site organized around a homepage that is more content rich than the Michigan site.

Noting Affiliations

The homepage is a good place to make note of the fact that your organization is part of the Alliance of State Pain Initiatives, and to make mention of other organizations that yours is in partnership with, or that have provided funding for your operations and/or website.

Uploading and Maintaining Your Site

Finding a Domain Name and a Host

Your site will need a web address along the lines of *www.sitename.org* (.org is better than .com or .net because it is most frequently associated with non-profit organizations). The name should be easy to remember and give a good idea of what the organization is about – some combination of the state name or abbreviation, the word *pain*, and perhaps the word *initiative* is probably best. To see if the name you would like to use is available, go to *www.whois.net* and enter the name in the “Domain Lookup” field. If the name is not yet registered, you can go on to register it yourself; if the name is already taken, Whois will suggest available variations that might work for you.

Other reputable sites that allow you to look up domain names are *www.1and1.com* and *www.godaddy.com*. All three of these sites, and many others, will let you register your name for a fee, and all offer web hosting services. One other thing to be aware of when you register your domain name is that you will probably have the option of automatically extending your registration (usually done on a year-by-year basis) with the credit card used to set up the account in the first place. Automatic re-registration is a good idea, eliminating the possibility that you will lose your name because it has expired and someone else has snatched it up.

A host provides the actual space on a web server computer and provides tools for administering your site and keeping track of activity on it. Hosts will also provide email addresses to go with the site (for example, *feedback@sitename.org*). Hosting packages vary quite a bit in what they offer for how much money, and it is worth spending time with your designer or someone else who is knowledgeable about running a website to see which package best suits your needs and budget. Our site uses *www.1and1.com*, which we have found to be economical and to offer good customer support.

Uploading Your Site

Your designer and/or coder will be familiar with how to transfer all the material that makes up your site onto the web server. This is done by FTP, or file transfer protocol, a standard developed for moving information across the Internet (just as HTTP, which precedes all web addresses and stands for Hypertext Transfer Protocol, is the standard that indicates that a browser is looking for a web page). The initial upload can be handled by the more technically adept members of your team, but you will need an FTP program in order to maintain the site over time.

Maintaining and Updating Your Site

Once your site is live on the web, and assuming your designer and coder have responded to initial feedback with any necessary changes to the design templates and functionality, maintenance of the site falls into two main areas: updating text and making sure that external links remain current.

Text Updates

If your site features the latest news about your organization or a calendar of events, those pages will need to be updated regularly. You certainly don't need to hold yourself to the minute-by-minute standards of a major news site, but if you are presenting an image of your site as fresh and current, it's important to avoid anything that makes it look stale. And nothing looks as stale as yesterday's news. Similarly, if you list your board members or have mentioned, for example, the status of state regulations on opioid prescribing, those pieces of text need to be kept current.

The way to do that is with an FTP program, which allows you to download and alter the pages on your site and then upload the changed versions. In order to use such a program, you will need to know the FTP address of your site and a username and password that will give you access. All of these will have been established when the hosting arrangement was set up and when the site was uploaded. You should make sure you have all the necessary information from your hosting company or other members of the site building team.

A free program like SmartFTP (available at www.smartftp.com) does an excellent job of connecting you to your FTP site and allowing you to open a web page for editing. Note that you will likely need to download an additional text editing program as well, one that displays an HTML page in an easy-to-read format.

HTML, or hypertext markup language, involves the use of "tags," which are bracketed bits of text that describe how the visible text on a web page will appear. Unfortunately, the default text editor that comes with Windows presents HTML pages in continuous text, making it difficult to distinguish tag text from the text that you actually want to edit. If you choose an HTML text editor like HTML-Kit (available at <http://tinyurl.com/5jmv5a>) and make it the default editor in SmartFTP, the tags will be clearly differentiated by color, and line breaks will separate the HTML commands. You will be able to clearly identify the text you want to edit and make changes as simply as you would in any word processing program.

Hyperlink Updates

Pages that you have linked to outside your organization's site are completely beyond your control. The content of the page may change, it may be moved to a different address, or it may be eliminated altogether. Part of the task of providing useful, accurate and current information to the users of your site involves making sure that any external links you provide still lead users to the same page they did when your site first went live. So you should regularly go to your site and test the external links for accuracy.

When links need to be revised or removed, you can make changes in a manner almost identical to the way you change plain text, described above. But be aware that in this case, you will be making changes to the text within a tag, not to the text that will be visible on the web page. In the example of HTML source code below, taken from the mipain.org website, the colored text is a tag that says, in essence, “The following text is a hyperlink that points to this web address” (note that tags work like parentheses and must open and close, with `` closing this particular tag):

The ``National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine`` at the National Institutes of Health is an authoritative source for information for both professionals and the general public.

So if you were to discover that the NIH’s introductory page on complementary and alternative medicine has moved to another location, you would need to change the web address that follows the HTML instruction `<a href=`.

In Conclusion

A small handbook like this one cannot cover nearly every issue you might face in putting together a website for your organization. It is hoped, however, that in presenting the task of web building in broad strokes, this manual will help you maintain a sense of where you stand in the process at various points along the way: whether you are measuring the scope of your project, collaborating with others on your team, or responding to the particular needs of your organization and your intended audience.

With your “big picture” objectives in mind, you are well equipped to follow through on the details. Identify your main message and you will be better able to elaborate on narrower topics; establish a partnership with the designer that embraces the interplay between verbal and graphical elements, and each of those elements will shine to best advantage throughout.

Most importantly, as you make decisions about organization, length, complexity and navigation, try to put yourself in the place of the end user of your site. The choices you make should always be the ones that enhance the user’s experience.

Figure 1 - MIPAIN.ORG CONTENT FLOWCHART

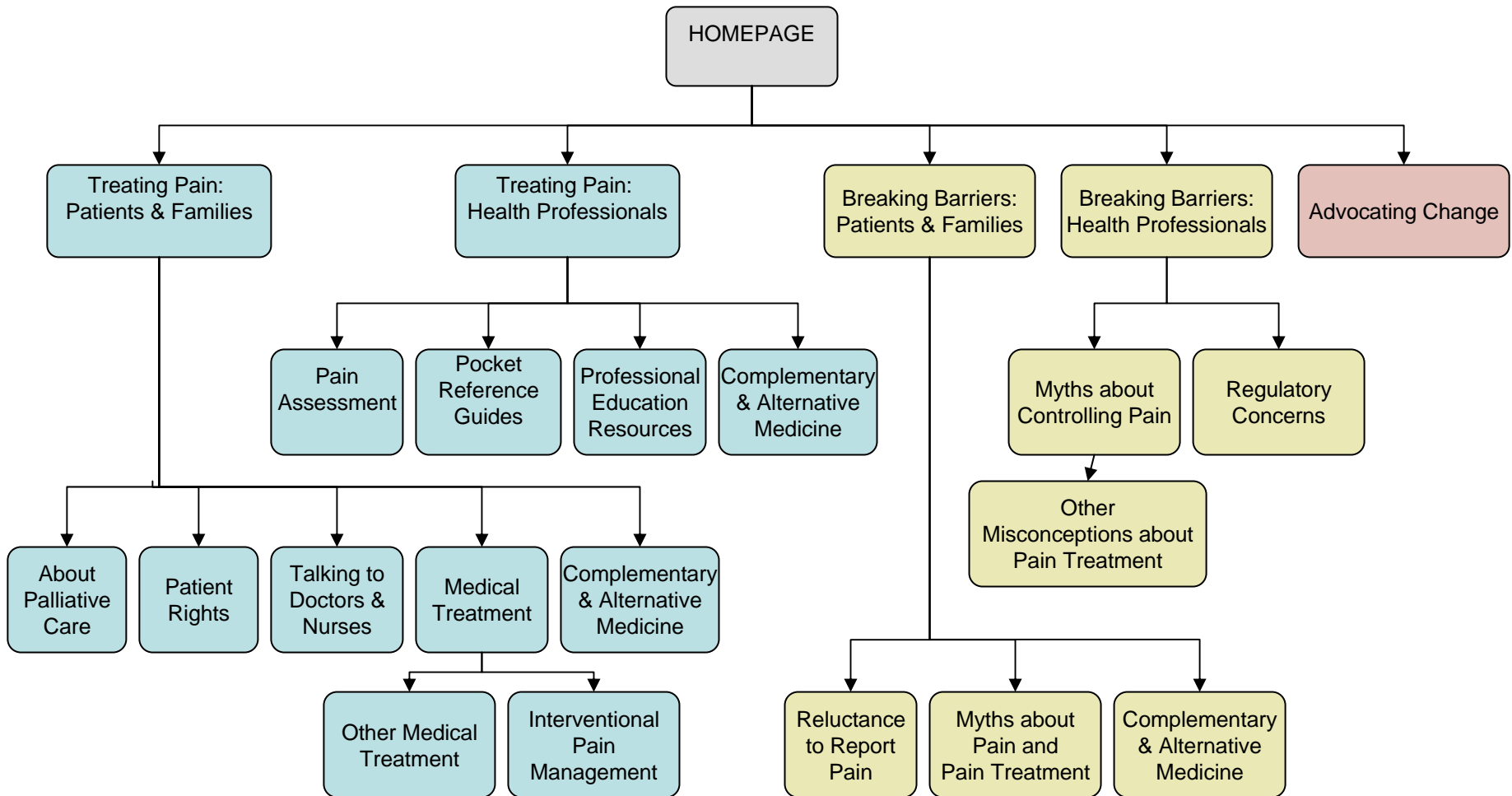


Figure 2 – COMPLETINGALIFE.MSU.EDU CONTENT FLOWCHART

