

Below is a **sample narrative essay** used for a personal statement as part of an application for medical school. The student recently completed medical school, and she is starting an ophthalmology internship.

First, Do No Harm

It was September 13, 1999. As I walked home from school, I remembered that Chris, my older brother, had asked me to buy some cocoa butter lotion for him, his favorite. My lunch money was still in my pocket as I walked into the pharmacy. I picked up the lotion and walked towards the cashier. Then he said the words I'll never forget, "*Yu hear seh yuh bredda dead?*" (In patois, the Jamaican dialect, this translates, "Did you hear that your brother is dead!"). "*Wha yuh seh?*" ("What did you say?") I asked as my mind raced to make sense of his words. He repeated himself, emotionless and insensitive to the fact that he was delivering news that would profoundly impact the rest of my life. I went numb, and my mind went blank as a sharp pain pierced my innermost being. I quietly said, "*Yeah, mi know,*" confirming a gut feeling that something terrible had happened. I paid for the lotion and walked out. Life, as I knew it, changed forever.

Chris was the younger of my two brothers and seven years older than I. He had a kind and gentle spirit, always going above and beyond what was needed to brighten the lives of everyone around him. After he was diagnosed with HIV in college, our lives changed. When other family members learned of his diagnosis, our immediate family was ostracized. This, much more than the pain of his illness, hurt my brother deeply, so he turned to illegal drugs to help ease his pain.

He was 23 years old when he died. He aspirated on his vomit as he lay in a bed next to the nurse's station in a Kingston hospital. There was no cry for help because a doctor ordered that he be sedated throughout the night after nurses complained that he cried out of fear constantly. And on that night, no one checked on him while he slept. After all, he had "the virus" and would die anyway.

Then, and today, the stigma that surrounds people infected with HIV/AIDS pervades society. In Jamaica, like many other places, people who are infected with the virus suffer immeasurably, not so much from the disease process, as from the isolation and shame they face. Sadly, Chris died, robbed of his dignity; afraid, ashamed and alone; raped by a system designed to do no harm.

The circumstances surrounding my brother's death haunted me for a long time. I was hurt because those responsible for his care didn't really care, and I could not understand why. He was judged, not by his character, but by a disease, and he became a disposable part of society unworthy of human affection. Doctors and nurses alike gave in to their prejudices and treated him like a pariah, not like the brother, friend, and human being I knew him to be.

My interest in medicine has been alive since I was three years old; however, the decision to become a doctor was cemented following my brother's death. I was determined to undo the unkindness he suffered. I felt that I could use the lessons learned from this tragedy to make a difference in many lives, and becoming a doctor one day I would be able to affect change from within the system.

Six years after he died, I became a nurse, committed to be an agent of change. Through nursing, I have learned how to give quality care and not be a source of condemnation. Instead of neglecting my patients, I nurture them. Instead of being their judge,

I remain objective and support them through life and death decisions. Instead of leaving them alone, I stay by their side when they are afraid. I do my best to preserve their dignity, and I believe that these are qualities of a good physician.

Each day, I approach my job at the Center for Chemical Independence not as a means to an end, but as my way of providing quality service to people at their lowest point in life. Through nursing, I have learned that it takes more than academic prowess to be a good physician. This artful practice requires one who is mentally and emotionally strong, one who is firmly grounded as an individual and not easily swayed by the biases ingrained in us through unquestioned social conditioning. Now that I have gleaned these principles, I am ready to embark on the next stage of my journey and become a doctor. Fully equipped with the tools of compassion and respect for human life, valuing each patient regardless of his or her diagnosis, I am absolutely committed and driven by the memory of a loving brother, to serve the dejected in our society. I will always strive to do no harm.