Carolynn is a 75-year-old female Navajo that was having trouble with her day-to-day activities and began to neglect her appearance and self-care. Her granddaughter noticed she would wear the same clothes for days at a time and did not comb her hair out every morning as usual. Carolynn is a widowed grandmother with eight adult children and twenty-five grandchildren.

Carolynn lives on a reservation near Flagstaff, AZ and owns many sheep and horses. Her daily activities include herding sheep and taking care of the animals including her dogs. Carolynn often had visits from her adult children, who lived and worked in the city two and a half hours away. Her grandchildren would also come and help her with the care of the animals.

Carolynn does not have running water or electricity and depends on her adult children to come down on the weekends to haul water for her. Lately, Carolynn's eyesight has been getting worse. She complains of dizziness and one day as she was herding sheep, she fell and could not get up. Her granddaughter found her outside when she did not come home for several hours after taking the sheep out to graze.

Carolynn was taken to the hospital emergency room forty miles away and was diagnosed as dehydrated and also having a broken hip. The doctors found that Carolynn also was developing cataracts in both of her eyes and had some signs of dementia. The doctors also thought she may be suffering from paranoia because she claimed that the “witches were out to get her.”

Because there are few medical supports out on the reservation and her adult children could not leave their jobs in the city to care for her, the family had no choice but to leave Carolynn in a skilled nursing facility in Flagstaff. At the facility, Carolynn began to suffer from panic attacks and did not want to eat. She also refused to shower and requested a “sweat bath.”

When her children would visit, she remained silent and did not want her children to worry about her. The staff noticed Carolynn was losing weight and would wander around at night trying to find a way out. She appeared to be increasingly depressed and isolated and continued to talk of “skinwalkers,” which was disturbing to the staff members.

Her family was notified and they requested help from a Native American social worker. The social worker talked with the family and learned that Carolynn was feeling panic because she had never been away from her land and animals for that long of time before. The family also explained that Carolynn felt like bad things happened to her because she must have done something wrong and in order to resolve the situation she wanted to see a medicine man.

Previously, Carolynn could not communicate these concerns with the staff because her English was limited. In addition, the staff was frustrated because whenever they would attempt to remove Carolynn’s bedpan, she would not let them have it for fear that if not properly disposed of a “witch”
could conceivably take it and send a curse on her. The social worker and the family decided it would be best for their mother to take a visit over the weekend to see a medicine man on the reservation.

The social worker also found some additional resources for the family including a caretaker who would go home with Carolynn and help her with daily activities such as bathing. The family was able to afford this caregiver by qualifying for the assistance via the Arizona Long Term Care System (ALTCS), which is the state Medicaid system. Due to religious reasons, family relatives were not allowed to assist with her bathing. Eventually, Carolynn's panic attacks and depression subsided and she felt more in harmony. With the help of the paid caregiver, she was able to stay home where she was content.