Can you tell me a little bit about your hospital and the units you cover?
I work at the largest freestanding children’s hospital in Canada with 453 beds. We see kids from all over the country and will be building a new patient tower within the next ten years. We have a team of about 20 child life specialists, as well as art therapy, music therapy, and a therapeutic clown program. I work on the Burns & Plastics Unit, which also sees Urology and Ophthalmology patients, and also see patients coming in through the outpatient clinic.

What’s your typical unit census and about how many patients do you see per day?
My unit is one of the smaller units, averaging about 12 patients on the census daily. There’s a mix of burn patients, cleft lip/palate patients, Pierre Robin Sequence babies, and other urology and ophthalmology cases – a wide range of diagnoses. I see more of the burn patients in the outpatient clinic, as they typically aren’t admitted for too long. I see about 7-9 patients per day, depending on the census.

What does your average day look like?
I start my day with checking in with the unit and charge nurses for report, print the census, and set up my volunteers for the day. The morning is generally heavier in clinic so I usually spend my mornings providing support for dressing changes and other procedures. I cover the whole plastics clinic so this may also involve casting and splints, bandage changes for other injuries like dog bites, etc., and surgery consultations. My afternoons I spend majority of my time on the inpatient unit facilitating pet therapy visits, visits to the activity spaces with isolated patients, therapeutic activities, and any procedural interventions that may come up (preps, distraction, coping plans, etc.). I TRY to end my day finishing up desk work 😊

What is your favorite distraction item and how do you use it?
A lot of my patients are littles so I go through bubbles like no tomorrow. I know it’s everyone’s favourite distraction, but I truly don’t know what I would do without them! I use them for deep breathing, to get kids to move their arms and legs for rehab purposes, have them pop bubbles with a glitter wand, count the bubbles, blow them on everyone’s faces, anything! It’s the best when you come across a patient who has never seen them before – jackpot.

What’s the best part about your job?
I LOVE being able to see how far patients have come. Being on the Burns Unit, you’re really able to see how quickly kids bounce back and how fast they heal. But also how much their coping progresses throughout their journey. A lot of my kids are in and out of the hospital (as are most), but one of the best parts of my job is seeing these families light up after not seeing them for a while. We see these families in very vulnerable situations and a lot of times at their lowest points, so when I get to see them weeks later and they’re absolutely thriving, I light up just as much as they do. It’s these times that make you feel like you truly made a difference just by being there, even when it doesn’t feel like it.

What’s the hardest part in doing your job?
For me, one of the hardest parts of my job are those times where I am not able to distract. Some things are just too painful and some patients are just too anxious, that no matter how much prep or how many distraction items you’ve pulled out, it just doesn’t work. The feeling of not helping is something I know almost every CLS has experienced. As much as I feel like a failure during these times, I know I’ve done my absolute best and that’s all you can do!

What’s a facet of your job that people wouldn’t expect?
Something people wouldn’t expect about child life is how active and front-line we are. Not only are we planning and prepping, but we are right there with the child, beside the doctors and the nurses. We play such an active role in the child’s care, for not being direct medical staff. We have such a great balance to our job, which I know isn’t always viewed that way!

What’s something you wish you knew when you started on this unit?
This unit has been the one area of the hospital I had not had much experience in, so I have been learning a lot about the conditions and diagnoses along the way. But my team and the staff I work with are incredible and always willing to help and incorporate child life (and everyone on the multidisciplinary team) and our expertise throughout every patient’s care. They go above and beyond and I truly feel supported and valued – I didn’t know just how much this would impact my practice until I experienced it.

Do you have anything else you’d like to share about your job, tips for students, or thoughts?
Always remember that YOU are your best tool!