New Beginnings
In this series we follow Pia Mint as she takes on a new challenge

Pia Mint began her dental career at 16 years of age during 1998. She was initially employed as a trainee dental nurse/receptionist at Mr Boyle's dental surgery. Mr Boyle was nearing retirement; in 2002 he sold the practice to two brothers, with plans for expansion and modernisation. Initially they employed two more dental nurses and appointed Pia as their receptionist/practice manager.

The new owners found Pia's knowledge of the practice and its patients extremely valuable. They were content to concentrate on clinical matters and to leave the administration to Pia. Over the following years the practice and the dental team expanded to become a four-chair practice providing 50 sessions per week of mixed NHS-private general dental care. Pia asked if the practice would fund her to take a practice management qualification, but the owners convinced her that she was doing a great job and would not benefit from taking a course.

By 2010 Pia had married and was expecting her first baby. Her baby was born in December and then she took maternity leave until September 2011. Nina, one of the dentist's partners covered Pia's practice management duties during her maternity leave. Whilst Pia was on leave was a significant turnover of staff. Some of the dental nurses had mentioned to her that they felt there had been an agenda to get them out, so that Nina could choose her own staff and secure her control over the practice.

When Pia returned to work many of the system and procedures she had developed over the years had been replaced by vague ill-defined procedures, which only Nina could operate. On her return to work she was ill at ease with the changes and wanted to reinstate her tried and tested policies and procedures. Even although Pia was back at work Nina continued to attend and the relationship between Pia and her employers deteriorated. This saddened Pia. On one hand she knew that she could settle for the new regime or accept it was time for new challenges.

She mentioned how she was feeling to one of the reps and before long she had a phone call from Jon-Luke Endeavour and his partner Hugo Hope, owners of Endeavour and Hope Dental Surgery. They knew Pia by reputation and wanted to offer Pia the new position of practice manager at their dental centre.

One of the reasons Pia accepted the practice manager appointment at Endeavour and Hope dental surgery was because they were keen to introduce a patient-centred philosophy based on the sort of quality systems and procedures that she had introduced over her years as practice manager at her previous practice.

The Endeavour and Hope dental surgery is located in a large detached house in an affluent Midlands suburb. Dr Harold Patterson established the practice in 1979. Jon-Luke and Hugo purchased the practice in 2009. During the past year the practice has undergone massive changes. Plans to re-brand the practice had been discussed to make the practice more attractive to private patients. The practice is well placed in a residential road very close to a busy shopping and commercial centre. Since her interview, Pia had started to read articles published in the dental press on dental practice management. She feels enthusiastic about joining a practice with like-minded owners where she can put her ideas into action.

On Pia first day she was the first to arrive at the practice.
It was exactly 9am when she knocked on the locked practice door. The brass plaque on the door stated that the surgery hours are 9-5pm Monday to Friday. It was 9.02am on Monday morning and the practice was still closed. A number of seemingly unsurprised patients were forming an orderly queue at the front door. It was 9.05am when the receptionist arrived and opened the door. The patients filed into the waiting room but the receptionist disappeared into another room and then reappeared to establish which patients were present. Pia approached the reception desk and introduced herself.

“Hello, I’m Pia.”

“Have you got your appointment card?” the receptionist asked abruptly.

“I’m here to start work” Pia replied.

“Are you sure? … Okay then… I suppose you’d better take a seat for now and I’ll ask him when he gets in!” the receptionist said, giving Pia a cold, steely stare.

At this point Pia considered walking out the door and going home. Was this practice’s patient-centred ethos fact or fancy? Considering that deterioration in the relationship between herself and her previous employers she was wondering whether she had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire!

At 9.10am Hugo Hope arrived in a flustered rush and went directly into his surgery. Pia got up from the waiting room and knocked on his surgery door. Dr Hope opened the door and seeing Pia said, “Hello… I’ll be with you in a minute… I’m just getting changed… I’m running late as usual. You know what Monday morning traffic is like!”

At this Pia asked the receptionist where their staff placed their coats and bags. She was shown to the staff room. As Pia placed her coats and bags. She was shown to the resuscitation equipment.

Pia said to herself “Either I stay and work on this practice, or I go now… Which will it be?”

If I decide to stay, am I up to the challenge? Will I get the support I need? Can I make this practice into the place Jon-Luke and Hugo described when they interviewed me?"

What do you think Pia should do?

Answer: Pia was very disappointed when the Endeavour and Hope practice fell short of the description given to her at the job interview. If they really did understand the CQC standards and were prepared to make changes to realise the ideals they had discussed, Pia should stay and make the dream into reality. Pia should set herself the target of making Endeavour and Hope the best ever dental centre.

If Pia is to succeed she needs a plan. She will need to:
- Define clearly and in detail, what the practice needs to achieve. (The ideal scenario)
- Conduct a gap analysis
- Plan the steps to move from where they are now into the ideal scenario.

Preparing the plan is relatively simple. Making it happen will not be at all simple. Pia is going into a practice where the team have had their fill of new management initiatives, each of which has raised expectations and failed to deliver. As a result new ideas are responded to with the “They’ve been on another course!”

She needs to fully understand this and find ways to engage the team.

Pia needs to begin by establishing the parameters of her new job role. In particular she needs a clear job description. She needs to define the boundaries and permissions for the whole team. Pia needs to win the respect of her new colleagues and the support of her new boss. She must achieve this without compromising her authority, by producing tangible results, small successes, and all fairly quickly. Pia would find the support of fellow practice managers, through her local practice managers’ network to help keep her focused on her goals.