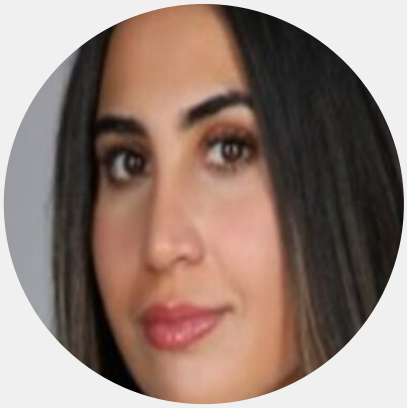
Shahad Mahdi – Acting Secretary General, PHRMAG



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PHRMAG represents the interests of the 26 leading research-driven biopharmaceutical companies in the Gulf region. Acting Secretary General Shahad Mahdi outlines the association's core priorities, how it fosters partnerships to drive access to innovation in the region, and how significant global trends like digitalisation are playing out in Gulf pharma.

Can you start by introducing yourself, and the key topics and priorities on the PHRMAG agenda?

I am the Acting Secretary General of the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers Association of the Gulf – PHRMAG. My background includes multidisciplinary experience across healthcare facilities development, medical devices, and pharmaceuticals. During my time with PHRMAG, I have had the pleasure of working with both healthcare authorities and the private industry in the GCC. My academic journey, encompassing an undergraduate degree in Toronto and an MBA at American University, Washington, provided me with a North American perspective. During my MBA, I did an immersive study in public-private partnerships (PPPs) in biomedicine, which aligns perfectly with my current role. Additionally, I specialized in data analytics. Now, driven by my passion for fostering innovation in biomedicine and creating value through PPPs, I find myself here, eager to make a meaningful impact.

By way of background, PHRMAG represents the region’s 26 (and growing) leading innovative biopharmaceutical research companies. The association is dedicated to enabling innovation, development, and access to medicine. At PHRMAG, we are committed to partnering with policymakers to support creating value for patients and contributing to policies that attract innovation across the Gulf Region.

Our first priority is to enable sustainable access to innovative medicine, which we do in collaboration with stakeholders and policymakers across the ecosystem. Second, we promote the value of the innovative biopharmaceutical industry by showcasing our capabilities and the true value that the industry brings to the entire healthcare ecosystem.

In terms of agenda items, we continue to be a proactive member of the healthcare ecosystem through our many engagements and collaborations with authorities. Of course, the crown jewel of everything we do is to always aim to do the right thing. This is embedded in our MEA Code of Promotional Practices.

More specific focus areas are executed by our working groups with functional focus areas such as Intellectual Property Policy, Regulatory Affairs, Healthcare Financing and Insurance, and Compliance and Ethics, to name a few. We have established numerous partnerships with authorities across the Gulf region. Our presence at the table allows the authorities to share their visions, enabling us to make meaningful contributions toward improved patient care and systems that attract more innovation.

What are some of the major industry trends at play today in the UAE?

The UAE stands out as a shining example of a country that embraces an open-door policy, allowing the private industry to actively participate and have a seat at the table. The UAE also has a robust pharmaceutical market, positioning itself strongly to compete on the global stage, owing to its unwavering commitment to progress.

A key trend that is of immense value to the industry is fast access to medicine and the acceleration of medicine available to the market. The UAE’s vision is to be the first market to make medicine available after or in parallel to the US. The UAE was the first market to issue fast-track guidance in the GCC, with accelerated timelines of 45 days.

The Ministry of Health and Prevention UAE (MOHAP) has been a pioneer in enabling fast access to medicine. At times, even further accelerating it, based on the designation of medication or an

unmet need for patients to be able to get timely access to the best science can offer, while upholding the integrity of the regulatory process. This was evident during the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

Another key industry trend is in the realm of Intellectual Property (IP). IP is a fundamental component of the biopharmaceutical industry model, serving as a cornerstone for innovation, research, and development. IP ensures that research continuously delivers today's medicines and unlocks tomorrow's cures, sustaining an innovation cycle that supports the knowledge-based economy.

Over the past years, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made remarkable strides in recognizing and safeguarding the importance of intellectual property rights within its healthcare sector. The UAE has been collaborating across the industry ecosystem to develop a robust legal framework and regulatory environment to protect and enforce IP rights effectively, both through Patent regulation and a strengthened Regulatory data protection framework. These positive strides are key in bringing cutting-edge innovation to the UAE and attracting research and development. With that, there still remains a road ahead to further strengthen the IP framework and ensure its robust execution of strong policies to further attract and grow the life-sciences industry.

How have PPPs evolved in the GCC since COVID-19?

COVID-19 was an extraordinary and unexpected situation that caught the world off guard. In response, the healthcare industry witnessed an unparalleled joining of efforts, involving both private and public sector entities, regulators, and governments, all collaborating harmoniously to safeguard the population and ensure its well-being. Due to the situation's urgency, communication channels were significantly shortened fostering seamless coordination among various stakeholders. That timeline accelerated the uptake of PPPs and more than ever highlighted the significance and power of PPPs. The pandemic served as a powerful reminder of the strength that arises when diverse entities, organizations, and regulators unite as a cohesive force.

How do you see digitalization playing into the UAE healthcare industry? What key developments have there been?

Digitalization and digitization are core to the UAE's Digital Health Agenda. The top two notions that touch on our industry are, enabling electronic submissions for drug registrations and Electronic

Product Information (EPI).

The UAE has taken a pioneering stance in enabling electronic submissions, making it one of the first markets to adopt this innovative approach. Companies can submit drug registration applications completely electronically without the need for strenuous and time-consuming steps. This advancement has resulted in streamlining processes and fostering efficiencies.

Electronic product information (EPI), essentially electronic leaflets, is another example within the UAE digital health agenda that has bolstered digitalization. The UAE introduced EPI, allowing companies to release electronic leaflets alongside digital support for patients. This move not only boosts health literacy but also brings additional benefits to sustainability. We believe that embracing technological advancements not only elevates healthcare standards but also fosters a culture of innovation and progress.

What would you like to see happen in the UAE in the next two to three years?

At PHRMAG, our ultimate hope is to ensure the development and delivery of the right treatments to the right patients at the right time. That is at the core of why we are here, not only to enable the treatment of patients but to improve their quality of life by minimizing illness hardship.

Moreover, we aim to continue to foster our relationships with authorities, enabling strong collaborations between bio-innovative pharmaceutical companies and governments in pursuit of our common goals. The healthcare system and environment are ever-changing, and we are dedicated to working hand-in-hand with authorities to support the great vision of the UAE and enable the best possible outcomes through this evolving environment. We are proud to be a part of an exemplary, healthy public-private relationship, where we work together towards the betterment of patients and the healthcare systems, more generally.

Last but certainly not least, in line with our code of ethics, we aim to continue our dedication to doing the right thing. Adherence to the MEA Code of Promotional Practices is a binding requirement for all PHRMAG members. Since its creation, it has been regularly updated; the last version came in early last year. It outlines our dedication to keeping integrity at the forefront.

What are your personal objectives?

My personal objectives are closely aligned with the organization’s objectives. Being passionate about healthcare, I see it as very humane to want to contribute to the health journey that patients go through to get better. As such, the objective has always been and will always be to attain the best possible patient outcome.

On a personal note, I would also like to highlight the dedication and passion demonstrated by my colleagues at PHRMAG, and our member companies which continuously inspire me. Their commitment to improving patient outcomes in the region motivates me to strive for excellence. I take pride in being part of a group that is making a positive impact on people’s lives. As I work alongside these exceptional individuals, my personal objective is to continuously grow, learn, and contribute to our shared mission of enhancing healthcare and making a difference in the lives of patients in the UAE, Gulf, and beyond.

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