

Community Pharmacy Practice in the United Arab Emirates



Written by [Alex Evans, PharmD, MBA](#)

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Key takeaways:

- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) consists of seven emirates, with several key regulatory bodies. Due to recent reforms, most legislation affecting the licensing and practice of pharmacy is standardized across all emirates.
- Prices are fixed for all medications approved for use in the United Arab Emirates. Distributors and pharmacies each receive a portion of the total price.
- Both pharmacists and pharmacy technicians work in pharmacies, and pharmacists recently have been able to administer vaccines. Clinical pharmacists — who are licensed and regulated separately — are allowed to provide services similar to medication therapy management (MTM).



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Community pharmacies are those that dispense medications to patients who aren't hospitalized or in nursing facilities. This series explores how community pharmacy practice differs around the world. In doing so, it gives us the opportunity to view our own system in a new light and potentially find opportunities for improvement.

So far, we've explored the practice of pharmacy in [Japan](#), [Finland](#), [Australia](#), [Switzerland](#), and [England](#). In this post, we'll look at our first Middle Eastern country: the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

To help us better understand pharmacy practice there, we interviewed Heba Azzam, a pharmacist who went to school in the UAE and is licensed in both the UAE and in the U.S.

How the UAE's pharmacy system works

Pharmacy regulation

The [United Arab Emirates](#) is a constitutional federation of seven emirates, geographical classifications similar to states in the U.S. Licensing is [regulated](#) by the [Ministry of Health \(MOH\)](#), the [Department of Health - Abu Dhabi \(formerly HAAD\)](#), and the [Dubai Health Authority \(DHA\)](#). In the past, each authority had separate licensing requirements, but those were [unified](#) into one set of standards in [2014](#) for all healthcare professionals, including pharmacists.

In 2019, the UAE passed [Federal Law No. 8](#), which updated and replaced [Federal Law No. 4](#), passed in 1983. It is considered a landmark piece of legislation that consolidated and standardized pharmacy regulation across all the emirates. It regulates the drug approval process, manufacturers, distributors, importers, and pharmacies.

Under this law, there are multiple different pharmacy license types depending on what the pharmacy wants to do or how they are structured, including:

- Compounding pharmacies
- Chain pharmacies (required for owning more than one pharmacy)
- Subsidiary pharmacies (used for pharmacies owned by hospitals, medical centers, and certain other institutions)

Like in many states in the U.S., licensed pharmacies must undergo routine inspections. The government of Dubai, for example, offers a [checklist](#) to help pharmacies prepare.

After a medication's approval, the [Ministry of Health and Prevention](#) fixes the price of the medication, and it may not be sold above or below that price. The price sticker must be on the package of the medication, and the pharmacist-in-charge is partially responsible for ensuring it is done.

The distributor and pharmacy both receive a regulated percentage of that fixed price. The Dubai Health Authority, which follows federal guidelines, has a [Drug List](#) which contains both the price the pharmacy pays and the price the patient pays for all medications in use.

Off-label prescribing is prohibited, and advertising of any form to the public for prescription products is also prohibited. Also, all controlled substance prescriptions must be on official forms prepared and numbered by the Ministry of Health and Prevention.

Interestingly, like the U.S., there are required elements of a prescription in the UAE, but those elements are different than in the U.S.. For example, the UAE requires a patient's weight and age to be on the face of the prescription label. That is a practice that could likely improve care in the U.S., especially with pediatric prescriptions, since it would allow for pharmacists to more easily double-check the dosage.

Pharmacy coverage and distribution

For UAE nationals, health insurance is covered through a national health insurance system, like Thiqa in Abu Dhabi. Expats typically have coverage through their employer, and health insurance is mandatory for those living in Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

According to Azzam, there are a lot of pharmacies in the UAE, and they are mostly independently owned. However, there are a few chain pharmacies, like Life Pharmacy. The most recent data reports support this notion: There are a total of around 3500 pharmacies in the UAE — a country of around 10 million — which is 1 pharmacy for every 2,857 people. In the U.S., there are approximately 60,000 pharmacies in a country of 330 million people, which is 1 pharmacy for every 5,500 people. So, on a per-capita basis, the U.A.E. has almost twice the number of pharmacies as the U.S.

Finally, each pharmacy must be owned by a UAE national. That means they must own at least 51%, making them the final decision-makers for the business. Pharmacies cannot be in grocery stores or department stores but can commonly be found as freestanding, independent businesses in shopping malls.

About community pharmacy practice in the UAE

There are pharmacy technician roles in the UAE, and, in order to become a pharmacy technician, candidates [must](#) complete a diploma in pharmacy that takes a minimum of 2 years.

This is different than in the U.S., where licensing is different for each state and some states choose not to regulate or license pharmacy technicians. Other states, like [South Carolina](#), have chosen to both license technicians and also put in place licensing pathways for advanced technician roles.

Pharmacists must have either a bachelor of science in pharmacy or a doctor of pharmacy and 2 years of experience. Pharmacists must maintain their license by completing at least 20 hours of continuing education per year.

There is a separate licensing process for clinical pharmacists, who are required to either have a masters in clinical pharmacy or a doctor of pharmacy and 2 years of hospital experience. They must practice in “a health institution licensed to provide the therapeutic services to the patients.” Federal Law No. 8 specifically defines clinical pharmacy activities, one of which is “provid[ing] care that optimises the medication therapy plan,” an activity that could be considered similar to [medication therapy management](#).

Medications are packaged in blister packs — not bottles — and pharmacists don’t put labels on them, according to Azzam. They might write additional information on the box for the patient, however, like “for blood pressure” or “once daily.” Very recently, pharmacists have been permitted to [administer vaccines](#) after taking a training course.

Pharmacists in the UAE are also required to report to the Ministry of Health and Prevention the “occurrence of an unexpected or serious adverse effect” as well as an “unexpected adverse reaction or serious adverse event” of a medical product.

The bottom line

The UAE's recently reformed system of pharmacy regulation has allowed for greater standardization of pharmacy practice across all the emirates. Their standardized drug price list helps to not only control cost but also control the profitability of both distributors and pharmacies. Healthcare coverage is universal for UAE nationals and mandatory in the emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, where the vast majority of expats live.

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