

Navigating the regulatory landscape

With the regulatory landscape constantly shifting, technical support is critical to industry brands. Here, *Health Food Business* catches up with the HFMA's Houaida Alawieh, about her role, her passion for nutrition and how she thinks regulation will evolve.



Legislation is a part of our industry that is ever-evolving, with new threats emerging all the time. When you then add in the complexities that Brexit has brought to regulation and it's clear to see this is a constantly moving, changing picture.

Meeting and managing regulatory requirements can be a huge undertaking for businesses in our industry, and outside support is often needed to ensure brands are compliant. This is an area that the Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA) specialises in through a range of services, including CLEAR CHECK.

One key member of the HFMA team is Houaida Alawieh, who works as the organisation's Technical Manager. Houaida brings with her much experience in the regulatory field, from food right through to nutritional supplements.

She commented: "Legislation is constantly evolving, and sometimes, what seems like a small amendment on paper, a single number or phrase, can have a huge impact on an entire industry. In the UK, we're at a bit of a crossroads when it comes to regulation. There's growing pressure for innovation and streamlining processes, particularly around novel foods, which is encouraging. But at the same time, discussions around a potential SPS agreement with the EU could mean closer alignment



with EU rules again, which creates uncertainty for businesses. We're also closely watching EU moves on issues such as MPLs, botanical health claims and novel foods as these could eventually influence UK policy, even indirectly. Overall, the landscape is becoming more complex and fast-moving, and that's exactly why it's so important for companies to be plugged into trade associations like the HFMA so they're supported, represented, and

ahead of the curve."

A passion for nutrition

Houaida's journey to the HFMA began some years ago when she pursued her passion for food.

She explained: "I grew up, studied, and started my career in Beirut, Lebanon, which is where I'm originally from. That experience has truly shaped my journey; food is such a big part of our culture, and my love for it started early on. From cooking and experimenting in the kitchen to later wanting to help make food safer, of better quality, and fully compliant with the legal requirements of the countries it's destined for."

She went on to study biology and biochemistry, followed by a master's degree in food chemistry, and then went on to complete a degree in agricultural engineering with a focus on sustainable development.

"After graduating in 2014, I started working in technical roles such as quality assurance and product development, always on products I had a personal passion for, like coffee, nuts, and confectionery," she added. "When I moved to London in 2018, I continued in similar roles, this time working with high-risk, ready-to-eat meals such as sushi, poke, and sandwiches. That move was a turning point for me, as it really opened my eyes to how food



legislation varies across regions, the differences, but also the common ground. That's when I decided to shift into the regulatory space and joined Campden BRI in a food law role, focusing on Arabic- and French-speaking markets and covering all kinds of food products, including pet food."

And it was here that she discovered a passion for nutrition.

"I've always had an interest in nutrition, particularly in how nutritional needs vary across countries and communities, something I became even more aware of after relocating," Houaida explained. "That's when I started exploring the fascinating world of food supplements and health food products. So, when the opportunity came to join the HFMA and focus on how these products are regulated, it felt like the perfect next step, and the timing couldn't have been better."

She continued: "From a young age, it wasn't just about cooking, I was curious about how food is handled and stored to keep it safe, and I loved reading ingredient

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lists and looking into how specific additives are made and regulated. I found it fascinating that something allowed in one country might be restricted in another, and that whole world of complexity really pulled me in. That's what led me down this career path. I started in food safety, working hands-on in factories, and it was such a joy to see the final product come to life. Later, I moved into product development, creating new recipes and seeing just how much science goes into every step. I really enjoyed that part too.

"These roles came with a lot of excitement, as you can imagine, working with food means no two days are ever the same. And now that I'm working in the regulatory space, it's a very similar feeling. There's really no dull moment. Being part of that process, understanding it, and helping others navigate it, is something I find genuinely fulfilling."

Food supplements focus

Houaida joined the HFMA in

May 2024 as Technical Manager, and explains: "A lot of things appealed to me about the role. Food supplements have always been a strong interest of mine, and the idea of working at a trade association like the HFMA, where you're engaging with both government and industry, really spoke to me. Being that link between the two feels incredibly important when you work in regulatory. You're not just interpreting and consulting on legislation, you're also helping to shape it, and you get to see first-hand the impact it has on the industry."

"Reading a job description and thinking 'this sounds like a good fit' is one thing, but what really sealed it for me was going through the interview process and meeting the team. For me, being part of a supportive and positive team is just as important as the role itself. I remember chatting with Pippa, our HR & Operations Manager, and then with Martin Last, and we just clicked. I've never left an interview feeling so happy and at home. That's when I knew this was where I

wanted to be.

"Although I've stayed in the food industry throughout my career, each role has been quite different. My previous regulatory position at Campden BRI was broader, I was working with international legislation across all types of food products. This role, by contrast, allows me to specialise in a specific category and focus more deeply on one region, which has been a welcome shift. It's given me the chance to really dive into the detail and make a meaningful impact in an area I care about."

And in such a busy and growing marketplace, Houaida's role is hugely varied.

"My days are usually a mix of staying on top of UK and EU legislation around food supplements and natural health products and providing our members with technical and regulatory support. I draft HFMA responses to government consultations, write guidance notes, contribute to our communications, and engage with regulators and trade bodies to make sure our members' voices are heard," she explained.

"I also manage the HFMA's Regulatory Complaints Process (RCPs), which is one of the many benefits available to our members. I coordinate the handling of reported non-compliant products on the market and liaise with the companies involved to reach a resolution and help maintain a fair playing field. Alongside that, I manage and plan our Technical & Regulatory Working Group meetings, prepare and host webinars, and take part in events and trade shows to help keep members informed and engaged.

"Although I've only been at the HFMA for just over a year, my role has already evolved quite a lot. For example, I wasn't originally managing the working groups, but after showing interest, that became a key part of my responsibilities. Taking on the RCPs has also allowed me to connect with a wide range of start-ups and businesses, which has often led to me introducing them to the work of the HFMA. More broadly, I've also really enjoyed being involved in shaping the HFMA's vision and helping to communicate that to the



outside world.

"There's a lot of satisfaction in knowing I've been able to support a member, whether it's helping them resolve an issue or talking through a regulatory matter that isn't straightforward (and there are plenty of those!). Being able to clarify something and make it feel more manageable for them is extremely rewarding. I also really enjoy the working group meetings. They're a great opportunity to see our members face to face, discuss current and emerging issues, and open the floor for questions. There's always a new and interesting topic or discussion that comes up, often sparked by those questions. Another part of the role I enjoy is working closely with our CLEAR CHECK team, we often get to brainstorm complex regulatory issues, look at new products coming onto the market, and work together on resolving RCP cases. It's a very collaborative environment, which I really value."

Clearly passionate about the HFMA and what it can offer to members, Houaida believes it helps to give brands – and industry as a whole – a voice.

"Navigating complex regulatory issues isn't always straightforward. Sometimes your interpretation is right, but you still need to talk it through, get a second opinion, or dig deeper into different layers of legislation to be sure," she explained. "That's where technical support and CLEAR CHECK really come in. For me, the biggest benefit is knowing you're not on your own, you're kept fully informed, supported, and protected as the regulatory landscape shifts around you."

"Our members have unrestricted

access to some of the best technical, scientific, and regulatory advice in the industry, whether it's through our in-house team or our expert advisors. Getting your claims right can also be a real challenge. Making sure your materials – whether labels, marketing content, business-to-consumer communications, or even podcasts – are compliant isn't easy, especially in the ever-changing world of food supplements and health food products. That's why having access to CLEAR CHECK is so important. It's a service the industry can truly rely on, not just for compliance, but for peace of mind."

She continued: "For me, one of the most important reasons to be part of the HFMA is the strong voice we give to our members through consistent representation. We're in regular dialogue with government departments, regulators, enforcement bodies, and other key stakeholders, and that means we can speak up on behalf of the industry and help shape the direction of future policy."

"Members also benefit from expert advice, practical guidance, regular regulatory updates, working group meetings, webinars, networking events, regulatory complaints process (RCP), and discounted access to CLEAR CHECK services. We also offer the assurance of being part of our Primary Authority Partnership, which provides a valuable layer of protection."

"So, whether it's staying compliant, navigating a challenge, or simply being prepared for what's coming next, membership gives companies the confidence that they've got the support that they need." **hfb**

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