working with agencies such as the US Secret Service, threat assessment aims to identify concerning behaviour and situations, and to take pre-emptive action to stop them escalating into violence.

This can involve simply confronting an individual about inappropriate behaviour — aggression towards colleagues, for example — and working with them to correct it. Or it can include maintaining continual contact with an individual and putting them in touch with any help they might need, such as mental-health services.

It is a challenging goal. Universities are big, complex environments where many students, staff and members of the community interact, not always peacefully. But existing networks that organize and monitor housing, health, grades and social activities do offer ways for universities to identify aberrant or shifting behaviour, as well as a robust support structure to get people back on track.

A News Feature on page 150 explores the growth of such programmes and teams, particularly in the United States, where easy access to guns and several high-profile shootings have put the public on high alert. There seem to be some clear benefits, but the spread of these interdisciplinary teams, which often include law-enforcement officials and representatives of university mental-health services, also presents several risks.

One risk that team members often worry about is how to balance individuals' civil liberties with the need to protect others. In an age in which privacy is increasingly illusory, life within the boundaries of a college campus can be put under close scrutiny with little effort. And freedoms of speech and expression must be maintained if institutions of higher education are to continue to nurture ideas.

Another risk of the focus on threat assessment is more subtle, and relates to the all-too-easy assumption that people who commit unthinkable acts of violence are driven by mental illness. It is true that mental illness is implicated in many high-profile cases of targeted violence and that many behaviours that would initiate a call to a threat-assessment team are related to a deteriorating mental state. But the links between violence and mental illness are complex and hardly correlative. Most violence is perpetrated by people who are not mentally ill, and most people with mental-health problems do not commit violent crimes.

The rhetoric of threat assessment therefore runs the risk of further ostracizing people who already face stigma. Many cases managed by a threat-assessment team — there are several hundred referrals per year at an institution such as Virginia Tech — are for students or staff going through a crisis in their personal or professional life. Practitioners are quick to point out that theirs is a support-focused process, more about putting individuals in touch with the help they need to weather that crisis than punishing them, banishing them or branding them as potential threats.

"For students these services can be extraordinarily helpful, even life-saving."

Such nuances can be hard for an individual to remember when facing a threat-assessment investigation. And the leading part played by law-enforcement officials in proceedings adds an air of presupposed criminality.

All of this is not to devalue the efforts of these teams. They can be among the first to recognize and the most eager to serve those struggling with mental illness. And they often partner with other student-service organizations whose goals are not focused on averting the next mass shooting. If a case is not deemed particularly risky, threat-assessment teams may pass it over to these groups. For students, who are often facing unfamiliar challenges, these services can be extraordinarily helpful, even life-saving. Many referrals to threat-assessment teams are prompted by threats of suicide, for example.

The politics at play here are sadly familiar in the United States. A highly publicized mass shooting is followed by calls for stricter gun control, followed by pressure from gun supporters to maintain the status quo or even loosen restrictions on firearms. Somewhere along the line, fingers are pointed to the role mental illness had in the attack and attention shifts to the dismal state of mental health care in the country. Accusations are made, as are promises, but little is done. Threat assessment may not be a solution to violence, but if it means that more people get the help they need, irrespective of whether it staves off the next attack, then, to some people at least, it is a success. ■

Conflict of interest

How two world wars affected scientific research, and vice versa.

This year marks the anniversary of two significant events from the last century, perhaps the most significant of any century: 100 years since the outbreak of the First World War and 75 years since the start of the Second World War. It is natural for specialist publications to search out a 'local' angle on major news events, and *Nature* is no different. When it comes to modern warfare, however, the task is easier than with most events, for science is not a tangential topic in armed conflict. It lies, for both good and evil, at its heart.

We live, said Martin Luther King, in an age of guided missiles and misguided men. Scientists can do little about the latter (although we must still try), whereas the former shows the contradictions of military research in all its shades of grey. If we are to kill people, then is it a good thing that we are able to target them more precisely? The death of one becomes more likely; the deaths of others less so.

In times of war, such ethical tongue-twisters tend to give way to the pragmatism of national politics. In 1943, James Collip, one of the 'Toronto group' of scientists that isolated insulin, observed that: "Today, with total war upon the world, there can be no doubt that more than ever before in history this war is a contest between the brains, imagination, inventiveness and teamwork of the scientists and production workers of one group of nations pitted against those of another group." Whereas the first three of those attributes were always common in science, teamwork, as Collip pointed out, came less naturally.

There are two ways to address the topic of science and war. The first, and the most conventional route, is to assess the impact that research has on conflict. Science in the First World War marked a turning point in tactics; no longer was a speedy and resourceful attacker likely to win. With machine guns and barbed wire at the front line, and behind them railroads for resupply, a well-dug-in defender became the favourite. (The US Civil War had demonstrated this too, but European generals were slow learners.) Technology made warfare asymmetric, and it has remained that way — the dreadful stalemate of mutually assured destruction by nuclear weapons notwithstanding.

The second route is to look at the reverse of the equation: how has conflict influenced research? What lessons are there for peacetime science in the panicked scramble of work that aims not to understand how the world works and to improve quality of life, but to ensure that it remains at all?

Nature intends to address both topics in several articles this year. And we kick off this week with a good example of each. On page 156, Sharon Weinberger reviews two books that analyse the wartime role of physics and psychology. And on page 153, David Kaiser explores how practical ways of getting US physicists to work together during the Second World War had an enduring impact on the organization and funding of science. For one thing, Kaiser writes, it turned on a "fire hose" of federal funds for research, a model that continues. The teamwork continues too, and if the stakes for winning and losing are lower now than when the original collaborations were forged, that can only be a good thing. ■

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