A Multi-Disciplinary Team Approach to Threat Assessment

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ABSTRACT. Threat assessment is a developing field dedicated to evaluating and managing threats of violence. Various situations may result in requests for threat assessments, and often input from several disciplines is necessary. The utilization of a multi-disciplinary team approach is described and illustrative case vignettes are presented. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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"I don’t know why nobody did anything. He told everybody he was going to kill his lawyer for not getting him any money after he was struck by lightning."—Statement made by the neighbor of a man who had just shot and killed his attorney, two other employees of the law firm, and then killed himself during a police standoff.

Incidents of violence, especially widely-publicized incidents with multiple victims, invariably bring questions of how the violence could have been predicted and prevented. Were there any warning signs? Were the events preceded by threats? Were the threats competently

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evaluated, or were they underestimated, misunderstood or ignored? Threat assessment is a developing field of knowledge, expertise, and techniques for evaluating and managing threats of violence. Some fundamental techniques and principles of threat assessment were outlined by Fein, Vossekui, and Holden (1995). According to Fein and his colleagues, violence is not merely an act, but also a process which develops over time that is the product of the individual, triggering conditions, and a setting that allows the violence to occur. The key to threat investigation and management is identification and understanding of the threatener's attack-related behaviors that precede and are related to his or her violent actions. Accordingly, “Threatening situations are more likely to be successfully investigated and managed if other agencies and systems—both within and outside law enforcement and security organizations—are recognized and used to help solve problems presented by a given case” (italics added)” (Fein, Vossekui, & Holden, 1995, p. 3).

In Protecting the Gift, Gavin de Becker (1999) reported that the superintendent of a school system in which a tragic incident of school violence had occurred commented that a large number of students would be involved if schools detained every student who threatened to kill someone. Other school principals told de Becker that threats made by students are so frequent that it is not possible to evaluate each threat. That was before the Columbine High School massacre. Now, few authorities are willing to dismiss threats without some assessment.

According to de Becker (1999), “There are individual institutions of society that evaluate literally thousands of threats each year, successfully separating those that require greater scrutiny from those that are mere words” (p. 187). Some individuals who make threats also pose threats, while many who make threats do not pose them and some individuals pose threats without ever making a threat (Fein et al., 1995). One of the goals of threat assessment is to differentiate real threats from bogus threats. Sometimes this is easy, while at other times it can be more challenging. Threats may often be ignored, minimized, or denied (de Becker, 1997, 1999; Nicoletti, Zinna, & Spencer-Thomas, 1999). Responsible authorities take threats seriously and respond accordingly. Professional threat evaluators insure that every threat receives an informed, competent evaluation. It is sound practice that until a threat is evaluated realistically it is best to err on the side of
caution, assume that the threat could be legitimate, and take steps to protect the target of the threat.

When a responsible person (e.g., a school administrator, supervisor, human resources manager) is made aware of a threat, and even when they personally know the threatener(s) and the likely victim(s), they may not make an accurate threat assessment. The decision-maker may lack specific knowledge and the objectivity necessary to make an accurate assessment. When an expert threat assessment is needed, the first step is usually to call upon law enforcement professionals for assistance. Law enforcement officers may be able to make an accurate appraisal of the risk of violence based on their training and experience. Likewise, they may seek assistance from expert resources.

In this article we discuss cases that may require a multi-disciplinary team approach to threat assessment. A core team of threat evaluators, with a list of available experts who are called in as needed, provides the depth and breadth of knowledge necessary to guide investigative efforts, accurately evaluate threats, help identify an unknown suspect, and formulate operational interventions necessary to manage the risks of targeted violence and its potential perpetrators.

INAPPROPRIATE COMMUNICATIONS AND THREATS

Professionals in law enforcement, security, and related fields are often called upon to evaluate a threat to do harm that a threatener (known or unknown) has made (or poses) against a target (a potential victim or victims, or a facility such as a government building or public utility). A threat implicitly or explicitly communicates a wish or intent to damage, injure, or kill the target (Meloy, 1999).

Nonverbal behavior can also communicate a threat. For instance, Calhoun (1998) defined inappropriate communications as “any contact or approach . . . —written, telephonic, verbal, through an informant, or by some activity [italics added]—that is unwarranted, ominous, threatening, weird, bizarre, or untoward” (p. xix), that is not a simple expression of opinion and is intended to unsettle or frighten. According to the Violence Against Women Grants Office (1998), most state stalking laws require a credible threat to be made for the offender to be deemed a stalker, but some require only that the conduct of the alleged stalker (e.g., following, spying, sending unwanted letters or items) constitute an implied threat.
Threats can be categorized a number of ways. Calhoun (1998) identified three categories of inappropriate communications that had been made against the federal judiciary. *Specious threats* are those that sound plausible, but are later proven to be false and there is no evidence of an effort to carry them out. *Enhanced threats* involve some effort to act on the threat, although the actions of the threatener are not necessarily life-threatening; enhanced threats present an increased risk for violence. With *violent threats* there has been some associated act of violence. Calhoun also suggested that threats could be categorized as potent or impotent, depending on the threatener’s ability to carry out the threat, physical or intangible, direct or veiled-indirect, immediate, conditional or deferred, and nonspecific.

Meloy (1999) offered an important distinction between instrumental and expressive threats: “Instrumental threats are primarily intended to control or influence the behavior of the target through an aversive consequence,” whereas expressive threats are primarily used to regulate affect in the threatener (p. 90). de Becker (1997) differentiated between threats and intimidations, which are manipulative statements of terms to be met in order to avoid some harm. As noted above, Fein et al. (1995) distinguished between *making* a threat and *posing* a threat, since not everyone who makes a threat intends to commit a violent act. Individuals who pose actual threats often do not issue threats, especially direct ones. Fein and Vossekuil (2000) suggested that:

> Many persons have been prevented or deterred from taking action because of a prompt response to their threatening communications. However, careful attention should also be paid to identifying, investigating, and assessing anyone whose behaviors suggest that he or she might pose threats of violence, even if the individual does not communicate direct threats to a target or to the authorities. (p. 15)

A person making a threat or intimidating statement may not actually represent a threat of physical harm to anyone. Fortunately, most threats are not carried out. However, false threats do require investigation because they are disruptive and accomplish a terrorist purpose (Bolz, Dudonis, & Schulz, 1996).

As a recent case demonstrates, these distinctions are important when a threat assessor attempts to determine the seriousness of a threat
and plan a threat management strategy. The case involved a subject's reaction to an article that appeared in a newspaper under the headline, "Law lets medical examiners seize body parts." Suspicious letters were sent to two medical examiners and a government official. Each of the individuals received a similar letter at their business address. Among the menacing statements in the neatly typed, one page letters was the following: "If your automobile blows up when you start it up to go home this evening from work, I did not do it but I will laugh robustly when I hear of it on the 6 o'clock news." The author signed the letters and wrote his return address on the envelopes. Investigators were assigned to gather intelligence information about the author. They learned that he was a military veteran, had a criminal history, and was on parole. Initially, this information was cause for concern. However, further review of the subject's background revealed that he was an overweight 63-year-old man with serious heart problems. He had received an early medical retirement from the military and had no experience with explosives. He had been in prison for mail fraud and for filing a false tax return. At the threat assessment team's request, the subject's parole officer called him to his office for an interview and confronted him with the letters. The man was surprised that his letters had been interpreted as a threat. It had not occurred to him that a medical examiner would need to retain bones for evidence in a homicide investigation. In this case, the threatener did not have the means, motive, ability, criminal intent, or experience to carry out the threat. The letters were merely an expression of opinion.

Threat assessment is a process that attempts to: (1) determine the likelihood that a person who makes a threat will carry out that threat; (2) identify the likely target(s) of a threat; (3) predict the extent and nature of the harm to the target(s) that can be expected; (4) guide threat management interventions; and (5) help identify and/or apprehend an unidentified threatener. Often an analysis of an anonymous threat can yield important clues regarding the identity of the author.

A middle school student received a series of seven increasingly angry and threatening letters in his school locker. A team comprised of four profilers from three different law enforcement agencies, a forensic psychologist, and an assistant principal from a different middle school independently reviewed the letters and focused on who the identified targets were and who might have a motive for the threats. Members of the team agreed that the most likely author of the letters
was the student himself and recommended an investigative strategy. When confronted with the assessors’ report, the youth confessed.

We find it helpful to differentiate between threat assessment and risk assessment. In our view, threat assessment is more case-specific than risk assessment. Risk assessment, often a more actuarial process, attempts to predict the likelihood that a person or persons with specific characteristics (e.g., convicted violent felons, psychiatric patients, sex offenders) will recidivate or commit acts of violence at some time in the future. According to Silver, Mulvey, and Monahan (1999), “The important question in terms of risk assessment is how to identify, from among a population of patients, those who, due to their high risk for violence, represent a threat to the public’s safety if discharged to the community (p. 238). According to Borum, Fein, Vossekuil, and Berglund (1999), the actuarial risk assessment model “is more difficult to apply to assessments of targeted violence because the base rates are extremely low and the research base is so far lacking” (p. 325).

THREAT ASSESSMENT SITUATIONS

Many different types of situations can necessitate threat assessments. Therefore, information about research and professional expertise in special areas (e.g., law enforcement investigation, terrorism, psychology, domestic violence, education) may be needed. Situations that are likely to require formal threat assessments by experts, or a multi-disciplinary team of experts, and for which there is an accumulating body of knowledge, include domestic violence and stalking (Meloy, 1999; Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999), workplace violence (Jacobs & Porter, 1999), school violence (de Becker, 1999; McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Nicoletti, Zinna, & Spencer-Thomas, 1999), dignitary, executive, and celebrity protection (de Becker, 1997; Calhoun, 1998; Fein & Vossekuil, 2000), extortion, product tampering, terrorism (Bolz et al., 1996), hijacking, and hostage situations (Trompeter & Honig, 1999).

It is commonly recognized that a simple school house threat can foreshadow a tragically violent incident. Based on a review of information about thirteen perpetrators of school-based shootings that occurred between January of 1993 and May 1998, McGee and DeBernardo (1999) provided a behavioral profile of “the classroom
avenger.” They identified some possible indicators of potential school violence and concluded:

Verbal expressions of intent to kill and/or commit suicide or do something highly dramatic within the very near future, when made in this context and in the presence of other primary variables of this profile, are highly predictive of an imminent attack. They should prompt appropriate intervention including law enforcement involvement. In that regard, these verbalizations are a differentiating identifier or hallmark of the Classroom Avenger. They frequently come in the form of threats, assertions of intent, boasts or warnings. Differentiati ng identifier statements include, “Tomorrow is the big day—something really big is going to happen” or “Soon I’m going to get her and I plan to kill the others too.” (p. 18)

Threats like these must always be evaluated. Who is making the threat? Why is he or she making the threat? Who is the intended target? Does the threatener have the means and opportunity to carry out the threat?

Several years ago, our team reviewed a letter that a prison inmate had sent to his son. The prisoner wrote to tell his son about his upcoming release. He then went on to write that he blamed his ex-wife (the boy’s mother) for all of his troubles in life. His ex-wife had endured sixteen years of physical and emotional abuse before she had the courage to file for a divorce. He then stalked the next woman he dated. When he was fired from his job for assaultive behavior, he stalked his former employer. He had been arrested and incarcerated for stalking the two victims, and also for breaking into his former girlfriend’s home and cutting up all of her clothing and bedding with a knife.

The ominous statements in the letter the inmate wrote included: “Johnny, I hate your mom for what she has done to me”; “I’ve met some very interesting people here and I can get a lot of things done”; and, “I hope she is happy and I hope she injoys [sic] life while she can.” The prisoner had also initiated correspondence with inmates who had been released to the area where his former wife lived. When his prison sentence ended he moved in with his mother in the same city.

The case took an interesting turn when the threatener’s mother filed stalking charges against her son’s ex-wife and former girlfriend. The
threatener’s mother had become a participant in her son’s obsession with the women. We believed the reason for the false stalking report was to provide an opportunity for her son to further intimidate both of the women and to help him locate their current addresses. The judge in the new stalking case was informed of the subject’s history and agreed to allow the women to wait in another location while he heard testimony from the threatener and his mother. The judge dismissed the case and both women moved to other cities. Unfortunately, they continue to live in fear that he will find them someday.

Borum and his colleagues (1999) stated that, “The threat assessment approach moves away from the idea of ‘profiling,’ and instead looks at pathways of ideas and behaviors that may lead to violent actions” (p. 327). However, we disagree with their narrow characterization of profiling. Law enforcement professionals trained in criminal investigative analysis (i.e., profiling) bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise regarding crimes of violence to the threat assessment team. Moreover, profilers can be particularly helpful in cases in which the identity of the threatener is unknown. Like criminal profiling, psychological autopsy/equivocal death analysis, and other investigative techniques, threat assessment involves both art and science (Cook and Hinman, 1999a). Threat assessment draws upon a base of investigative experience and specialized training. Many investigators trained in profiling are also trained in threat assessment. Threat assessment also requires an understanding of the psychology of aggression (e.g., Megargee, 1993), and characteristics associated with violence in particular types of threats (e.g., Calhoun, 1998; Meloy, 1999).

Fein and his colleagues (1995) recommended the use of consultation with other members of the threat assessment unit or external experts as part of the threat assessment process. Consultants may bring a fresh perspective to the investigation. In addition, documentation of the use of consultants can demonstrate the good-faith efforts of the threat assessor in the event of an undesired outcome. Elsewhere, we suggest that a team approach offers advantages in criminal investigative analysis and profiling (Cook & Hinman, 1999a, 1999b; Hinman & Cook, 1999). A fluid, multi-disciplinary team which draws upon experts from various backgrounds can also generate superior threat assessments.
MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INPUT EXTEND THE THREAT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Fein and Vossekuil and their associates (Borum et al., 1999; Fein & Vossekuil, 2000; Fein et al., 1995) described the step-by-step assessment process and the key questions addressed in threat assessments developed by the United States Secret Service. The ten key questions are:

1. What motivated the subject to make the statements, or take the action, that caused him/her to come to attention?
2. What has the subject communicated to anyone concerning his/her intentions?
3. Has the subject shown an interest in targeted violence, perpetrators of targeted violence, weapons, extremist groups, or murder?
4. Has the subject engaged in attack-related behavior, including any menacing, harassing, and/or stalking-type behavior?
5. Does the subject have a history of mental illness involving command hallucinations, delusional ideas, feelings of persecution, etc., with indications that the subject has acted on those beliefs?
6. How organized is the subject? Is he/she capable of developing and carrying out a plan?
7. Has the subject experienced a recent loss and/or loss of status and has this led to feelings of desperation and despair?
8. Corroboration—What is the subject saying and is it consistent with his/her actions?
9. Is there concern among those who know the subject that he/she might take action based upon inappropriate ideas?
10. What factors in the subject’s life and/or environment might increase/decrease the likelihood of the subject attempting to attack a target?

To answer these questions and others, the threat assessment team must acquire and evaluate a large amount of information of various types. This is easier for a team to do than for a single individual.

USING MULTI-DISCIPLINARY RESOURCES FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT

Nicoletti and colleagues (1999) proposed that schools develop threat assessment/violence management teams to coordinate preven-
tion efforts and responses to violence. They recommended that the team be comprised of the principal, teachers, guidance counselors, legal advisors, campus security and local law enforcement officers, parents, and individuals trained in evaluating and intervening in potentially violent situations. The authors stated: “Because this team must evaluate potential violence problems by assessing a student’s potential for violence, its members must be sufficiently trained in threat assessment and general indicators of violence” (p. 80). This may be an excellent idea for sensitizing the community to the importance of violence prevention. However, we do not believe that threat assessment should be done by a large committee because the proper evaluation and management of threats requires a team of highly trained professionals. When a team is required, the group may include other law enforcement officers, investigators, violent crime profilers, security professionals, forensic psychologists and other mental health professionals, human relations managers, and consultants with special areas of expertise.

For our threat assessment team, the process begins when a threat has been received or perceived by a victim, a police agency has been notified, and we have been asked to analyze or evaluate the threat. Our first step is to obtain a copy of the threatening communication or other documentation of the threat or threatening behavior, as well as all available information about the alleged victim and the suspect if he or she has been identified. The original communication is retained as evidence by the requesting agency and processed for fingerprints. The communication and background information are organized and documented in detail by the team coordinator.

Because a multi-disciplinary team can be most effective when members are provided with the best information available, an expanded intelligence check is initiated. At times this requires creativity and diligent investigative work. Intelligence analysis is critical to the threat assessment process. Merely checking the subject’s name on a computer generally fails to yield the extent or type of information that is critical to the assessment process. It has been our experience that additional input from team members leads to creative use of intelligence assets. Some examples of additional information that the threat assessment team may ask for are:

**Police reports:** In all cases where the subject has had prior arrests, the team requests a copy of the initial officer’s incident report. In a
recent assessment, we noted that a suspect had been taken to jail for violation of probation and resisting arrest. This would ordinarily suggest a cause for greater concern in the assessment. However, we reviewed the officer’s report and found additional information that was deemed to be important. The officer indicated that he responded to a rented houseboat to evict the tenant. The tenant told the officer that he had lost his job due to a serious back injury and he was behind on his alimony payment and rent. His ex-wife’s brother owned the houseboat and had filed the eviction. The subject asked that the officer take him to jail because he did not have anywhere else to go and it was raining.

Name Search: In addition to computer checks for arrests, we telephone the police agencies in the vicinity of the subject’s residence and work areas to request a computer or hand search of records for the subject’s name. We request a copy of any case information in which the person appears as a suspect, witness, or victim. Additionally, we ask for reports associated with any calls for police service at the subject’s home address. When a long, rambling, and somewhat bizarre letter was received by a medical examiner, team members were not surprised to find reports at a local police agency that the same man had presented himself in the police department lobby to report alien activity in his apartment. During the lobby interview, the duty officer obtained the name of the subject’s psychiatrist and the type of medications he was taking. In another case, we discovered numerous reports of intentional damage to three of the subject’s neighbors’ property for which he had never been arrested. Knowledge that an individual has made good on past threats is valuable information when attempting to predict what he will do in the present case.

Employment Applications: A request for an employee’s application can yield valuable information that will identify the places he or she has worked and the cities of prior residence. In a workplace violence investigation we conducted, we placed telephone calls to all of the subject’s former employers. We gained valuable insight into the subject’s background. All of the previous employers made statements such as: “We were all so relieved when he left,” “He was just a ticking time bomb, everyone was afraid of him,” and, “It was only a matter of time before he acted on his threats.” In another case, we were able to identify a city where the subject lived and worked for an entire year. A check with the local police agency for cases similar to
ours helped identify this subject in two cases of unsolved lewd assaults on children.

When sufficient case information has been obtained, a threat-specific team is selected to review the case. Copies of the threatening communication, case background, and intelligence summary are forwarded to team members for review. When the team has reviewed the available information, members of the team may meet in person, or they may confer via separate telephone calls or by conference call to discuss the case. At this point a decision is made regarding the validity of the threat and an investigative strategy is proposed. In cases where the team determines that a no risk or low risk situation exists, no further action is recommended. In moderate or high risk cases an immediate plan is instituted. This may include recommendations for the approach, location, and nature of face-to-face contacts with the suspect.

The threat assessment coordinator is responsible for summarizing, documenting, and communicating the team’s findings to the requesting individual or agency. The threat assessment is revised as new information is received or when additional threats or threatening behaviors occur.

The process does not end with the decision that the victim is or is not in danger. A threat management plan to help ensure the victim’s present and future safety is recommended. The following is an example of a threat management plan that the team offered in a recent case. The team thought that a threat was posed, but no direct threat had been made. A government employee was fired for extortion. When his supervisor was deleting items from the terminated employee’s computer, she discovered six recipes for bombs which had been downloaded from the Internet. Because the terminated employee had the experience, ability, and capability to follow these recipes and build a bomb, and because he might have the motivation to do so, a threat management plan was formulated. The plan included notifying the local police department of the potential of a bomb if they received a call for police service at his address. Photos of the subject and his vehicle and the addresses of potential victims were provided to patrol officers. The team recommended that entry codes be changed to prevent unauthorized access to the office building. To monitor this case, informants such as former coworkers and friends were identified who
could provide information regarding the subject’s activities and state of mind.

In a multi-disciplinary team approach, not every threat needs input from each team member. A threat that includes information regarding fires or bombs should involve a consultant with special expertise in this area. Mental health experts are an important part of the team when there is a threat from an individual who is exhibiting bizarre behavior or who appears to be using drugs or alcohol. Our team psychologist was important in assessing the mental status and threat potential of an individual who persisted in leaving bizarre messages at the gate of a governor’s mansion. The individual was obviously mentally ill. His messages reflected his illness but no evidence of menace. A handwriting analyst can be a valuable resource in determining if a series of letters has been written by the same individual. An expert on religion or cults can provide insight into the ideals of a group and help focus an investigation. A computer expert can assist in a variety of ways such as identifying the author of a threatening communication and determining the electronic location from which the communication originated. Other professionals that have been utilized in the threat assessment process include experts on terrorism, gangs, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and political science.

An example which demonstrated the value of a multi-disciplinary team approach to an evaluation of a written threat occurred with the review of a letter that was received by a university. The typed, one-page letter was addressed to the editor of the school newspaper. The editor’s name and address were correct, and the letter was post marked in the immediate area. In substance, the author threatened to bomb an administration building, kill one white female professor in public near the College of Arts and Sciences, and leave one fake detonator in a crowded “area of eating.” The threatened events were to take place if the letter was not published in the newspaper by a specific date. The letter was alleged to have been written by “The One The leader of the War Purgers.” The War Purgers were described in the letter as, “a diverse group of extremist individuals that are dedicated to the Death, Destruction and demoralization of the Great Satan,” which was a reference to the United States.

Five experts from law enforcement and psychology were selected and asked to review the letter to determine if a genuine threat existed. Points that were considered by the team members included: the ob-
vious proximity of the writer to the school, his need for power and control, the large number of available female targets in the area, the brief amount of time between the receipt of the letter and the target date, identified Islamic group activity in the school, possible reasons why the author may feel wronged, ways to look for additional communications from the individual, a course of action to lessen the danger to the students, and an investigative strategy to identify the subject. All of the assessors concluded that the letter was the work of one individual and not a group. None of the assessors considered the threat to be a fake.

When an Arabic linguist was asked to review the letter, her immediate response came as a surprise to the other assessors. She chuckled, inquired if the group thought the letter had been written by a foreign terrorist, and wondered whether the threat had been taken seriously. Furthermore, she indicated that a genuine threat from an Islamic terrorist should have made reference to Allah. Based on the linguist’s years as a translator, she did not think that the word choices in the threatening letter were typical of Arabic speakers. To our untrained eyes, the author appeared to be writing in English as a second language. In her opinion, the author was obviously a native English speaker who was trying to write like a person from the Middle East. She was correct. A 19-year-old college sophomore who lived in a dormitory was subsequently arrested. He was a native Floridian.

It is important to choose experts carefully. Not all “experts” are truly expert. A police department tactical apprehension and control team responded to an incident in which an armed subject had barricaded himself in a house and threatened to kill himself. After attempts to negotiate with the subject to put down his weapon and come out failed, the police summoned the man’s counselor to the scene. The counselor was asked about the seriousness of his client’s threats to harm himself. He told the police that his client was a sociopath, and stated that sociopaths never kill themselves! The knowledgeable reader knows that this was not a valid statement on which to base a threat assessment. The subject made good on his threat to kill himself a short time later. Accounts of the incident and the therapist’s incompetent advice have reverberated in the agency and community for years. A police officer mentioned the incident to one of the authors within the past few months. The counselor’s mistaken opinion undoubtedly kept
law enforcement from seeking the assistance of mental health experts for subsequent incidents.

Threat assessment teams must make sure that the experts they consult are, in fact, knowledgeable, objective experts. True experts will not make absolute statements or predictions concerning human behavior. They provide pertinent information and insights, give qualified opinions, and offer advice. Agencies often rely on a person’s therapist to provide an expert opinion regarding the seriousness of a threat, when the threatener is known to have a mental health history. It is very reasonable, and often standard operating procedure, for a threat assessment team to contact a subject’s therapist to gain information about the threatener. When professional ethics allow, the therapist may provide a wealth of information which can be helpful in assessing the level of threat and planning a threat management response. The threat assessment team must take responsibility for any decisions that are made. They should keep in mind that the threatener’s therapist may not be objective in providing information about his client. According to Melton, Petrila, Poythress, and Slobogin (1997), the relationship dynamics between a therapist and client may interfere with the accuracy of information needed in a forensic assessment. Like the forensic assessment, threat assessment requires information that is unbiased and accurate. One way to achieve this goal is for the threat assessment team to include an experienced forensic mental health expert who can evaluate all available information, including any information provided by the subject’s therapist. There is no dual relationship in this situation, since the threat assessment team’s experts work for the team.

**THE FUTURE OF THREAT ASSESSMENT**

Threat assessment requires new skills and methods of analysis for both criminal justice and mental health professionals (Borum et al., 1999). At present, it is an art that relies on professional training and experience. The science of threat assessment must be advanced by relevant research. An activity important to the public safety, threat assessment should never be undertaken as a casual enterprise. Until it becomes a science, it will require conscientious, thoughtful, thorough analyses of the risks of targeted violence. For many threat assessment situations, multi-disciplinary teams provide the most reasonable approach to providing accurate threat assessments.
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