

6. Rabies

In 1996, Dr. R. Michael Benitez was participating in a clinical pathologic conference where doctors are given patients, along with a list of symptoms, and instructed to diagnose and compare with other doctors as well as the written record. The symptoms of the anonymous patient E.P., "a writer from Richmond" were clear: E.P. had succumbed to rabies. According to E.P.'s supervising physician, Dr. J.J. Moran, E.P. had been admitted to a hospital due to "lethargy and confusion." Once admitted, E.P.'s condition began a rapid downward spiral: shortly, the patient was exhibiting delirium, visual hallucinations, wide variations in pulse rate and rapid, shallow breathing. Within four days—the median length of survival after the onset of serious rabies symptoms—E.P. was dead.

E.P., Benitez soon found out, wasn't just any author from Richmond. It was Poe whose death the Maryland cardiologist had diagnosed as a clear case of rabies, a fairly common virus in the 19th century. Running counter to any prevailing theories at the time, Benitez's diagnosis ran in the September 1996 issue of the Maryland Medical Journal. As Benitez pointed out in his article, without DNA evidence, it's impossible to say with 100 percent certainty that Poe succumbed to the rabies virus. There are a few kinks in the theory, including no evidence of hydrophobia (those afflicted with rabies develop a fear of water, Poe was reported to have been drinking water at the hospital until his death) nor any evidence of an animal bite (though some with rabies don't remember being bitten by an animal). Still, at the time of the article's publication, Jeff Jerome, curator of the Poe House Museum in Baltimore, agreed with Benitez's diagnosis. "This is the first time since Poe died that a medical person looked at Poe's death without any preconceived notions," Jerome told the Chicago Tribune in October of 1996. "If he knew it was Edgar Allan Poe, he'd think, 'Oh yeah, drugs, alcohol,' and that would influence his decision. Dr. Benitez had no agenda."